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CANUTE THE GREAT:

THE CUP OF WATER.

BY

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CANUTE THE GREAT.

"O Heavens! how awful is the might of souls,
And what they do within themselves while yet
The yoke of earth is new to them."

PRELUDE. *Book III.*

PREFACE.

THERE is a peculiar pleasure in visiting a district of one's native land that has retained the idiosyncrasies of a province. It is like coming across an unexpected phase in the character of a familiar friend. Association quickly hallows what is crude in novelty. This sensation I experienced in an exceptional degree when, two years ago, I spent some weeks of the summer in Norfolk. The humble landscape, with its clear-cut outlines on the horizon, its large sky, its penetrating sunshine, impressed me with the absence of mystery and reserve. Unobstructed stretches of corn-field lay open to the seasons and the wind. As soon as I sailed among the Broads I discovered that this shadowless, unguarded country had a secret and seclusion of its own. Moored close to the shrouding boundary of the reed-bed, among the water-lilies and the soft ripples, one seemed to catch the very heave of the breast of silence. Yet from the centre of one of the loneliest of these rush-girdled meres the boom

of the ocean breaks on the ear. A few sand-hills divide Horsey-Mere from the unprotected coast.

Attracted by the features and traditions of this Danish kingdom, I cast about for a subject that should be of use to me as a playwright; and, ultimately,—on the advice of Professor A. W. Ward, to whom I beg to offer my sincere thanks for the suggestion of a fine dramatic problem,—determined to treat of the conflict of Edmund Ironsides with Canute. The interest attaching to this struggle culminates in the penitential vows of our first Danish king, to govern his life thenceforward by rectitude, to observe equal judgment everywhere, and if, through the intemperance and negligence of youth, he had done what was not just, to endeavour by God's help entirely to amend it. His later years are an expiation to England for the murder of his great English foe.

The story of Canute is full of the tragic element of evolution:—I say, *the tragic element*, in opposition to the still prevalent doctrine, that declension and calamity, rather than development, are essential to the composition of tragedy. The evils of an age of decline cannot be compared with the pangs of a new era; for neither the race nor the individual possess in the term of decrepitude that vitality that gives poignancy to regret. When, on the contrary, a vigorous, aggressive, and undisciplined people comes to recognise its barbarism through contact

with the civilization it has defaced, it wrestles with an intolerable shame. In the evolutionary struggle the survivor is himself a tragic figure. Every sunrise brings him into sharper antagonism with the beliefs and habits that beset while they revolt him. He is alienated from his gods, his forefathers, his very dreams. His hopes are not founded on experience, nor his ideals on memory.

Causes such as these invest the person of Canute with a singular and mournful majesty. Centuries of fierce, pagan blood in his veins, he set himself to the task of becoming a great Christian governor and lawgiver to men. It is the business of this play to expound how these things came to be, and at what cost they were achieved.

As the ages roll on, we find no grim, inhuman shapes by the wheel of Destiny. The feeding of the spindle, the snapping of the threads, does not indeed belong to man; but to his hands a great, formative power has been given, and with this self-determination, if he has lost the misery of being the plaything of the gods, he has gained access to the deepest sources of pain in increased capacity for humiliation and remorse.

M. F.

NOTE.

It may be remarked at the outset, that that reader will be least chafed by the historical inversions in these pages who remembers of the period treated simply what he learned as a child. Emma's marriage with Canute, which did not take place till after the death of Edmund, in this work immediately succeeds the partition of the kingdom. Again, by special treaty, Eric and the Danish ships were allowed to winter in the Thames after this division; for dramatic purposes Canute is placed in command of his fleet within sight of London. In justice to Canute it should be added, that not one English writer directly charges him with the murder of King Edmund. It is also due to Edric, earl of Mercia, to admit that there is no distinct evidence that he was the author of the crime. Even on the supposition that he was guilty, a hint of a single chronicler is the only authority for assuming that he chose his young son to be the instrument of his wickedness.

From the above remarks it will be evident that the story of Canute has been dealt with almost as freely as if it were a legend of the Round Table. At the same time the mutilations of history have been made deliberately for psychological or dramatic reasons, and careful study has been given to the period. Cordial thanks are due to Professors T. N. Toller and A. W. Ward for the light they have thrown on obscure points, and for the loan of several books difficult of access, notably Laing's *Sea-Kings*, and the *Knutlinga Saga*.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

CANUTE, son of Swend, King of Denmark.
EDMUND IRONSIDES, son of Ethelred, King of England.
EDRIC STREONA, an English Alderman.
ETHELNOTH, Archbishop.
THORORIN, a Scald.
HARDEGON, an old Danish Jarl.
ALFGAR, child to Edric.
EMMA ELFGIFU, widow of Ethelred, step-dame to Edmund.
EDITH, wife to Edric, sister to Edmund.
ELGIVA, wife to Edmund.
GUNHILD, a Scandinavian Prophetess.

English, Danes, Normans, Monks, etc.

SCENE.—Various parts of England.

ACT I.

SCENE I. *The Danish Fleet at Gainsborough.*

Enter CANUTE, THORORIN, *and* HARDEGON.

Canute. My father dead! O Skulda, not in fight!
At eve among our slaughtered warriors
The fierce Valkyries missed him. On his couch
He groaned and died ignoble.

Hardegon. With no scar,
And yet he swore he bled.

Thororin. In health and valour
He stood among his men, a mighty man,
Straight as a fir-tree on Norwegian hills,
When of a sudden limb and eye were cowed;
He shivered as a trunk before the axe;
And crying,—*Help! St. Edmund comes to slay!*
He fell to earth a madman. All night through
He called the surgeon to his uncut flesh
In torment and despair. At early dawn
He started and turned quivering to the light,
Then broke into a shriek, *He comes again!*
And, pulling up the skins about his eyes,
Sank breathless.

Canute. O my father, hadst thou lain
Within thy lighted ship upon the sea,
And felt the gnawing of thy funeral fire

In every failing member, I, thy son,
Had joyously beheld. But on thy pillow !—

Hardegon. Would he had left St. Edmund's town in peace !

He saw a spectre. Well I deem the dead
A people by themselves ; come of what stock
They will, it's in a ghost to freeze the blood.
I doubt not that St. Edmund wore a frock
White like a girl's, and yet was bright as Baldur
About the head. These Christians have a way
Of shining that dumbfounders. I have stopped
Hacking the bald-heads, frighted by that clear,
Fixed smiling. There is magic in these monks ;
They must not be insulted ; and our king
Sneered at the dead man's altar.

Canute. Thororin—

These saints we slay, these peaceful priories
We burn to blackness in their green retreats,
Have deep, compelling power and ordered sway,
That trouble and subdue me. I have stood
Among the smouldering orchards, and a sound
Of strange, invisible woe has struck my ear,
Wandering around the ruins. When I leap
On board my dragon-vessel, loose my soul
To the dark blast, scent the accustomed foam,
I call on Odin ; when the sea grows calm,
I think of those still churches, their grey priests,
With gracious, learnèd faces. They rebuke
My lawless blood, yet satisfy a want
That lurks within my brain.

Hardegon. What is this folly?
It is the things of old that keep us men.
Thororin. A gentle worship is not for a people
Whose mothers nurse them in a shaggy land
Of pines, and scarpèd rocks, and howling wolves;
Whose fathers row their children out to sea,
And make the waves their playfellows, the storm
Their foster-sire; who all their after days
Dwell in the whirl of nature.
Canute. I am back
With my old gods when there's a mighty wind,
That sets my locks a-sail. O Hardegon,
I am a Viking still. I, as my sires,
Worship All-father's Raven, as I mow
My way through corpses underneath its pinions;
Yet with a curious dread I pause to hear
The monks chant in the vales.
Thororin. I know the music;
It cannot match the short sweep of our verse,
That hath a wind behind it.
Canute. I shall live
To be the grandest theme, my Thororin,
Harp ever sounded. Hardegon, take cheer;
I will hold sway in all the northern lands,
And in this well-loved England base a throne
That Cerdic's race shall shake not.
Hardegon. Sense at last!
Thororin. And inspiration. Oh, he fires my heart!
Canute. Who enters?

[*Enter* EDRIC.]

Hardegon. Edric, the sly alderman

That overtops all England.
Canute. Then a fellow
To use with skill and caution.
Edric. On my knees
I greet the king. I have vast influence,
Am husband to the princess, own a store
Of schemes and secret counsels. Verily
In me you have a God-send.
Canute. Whom we greet.
Edric. I come to tell of treason.
Hardegon. Let us hear
Your lies.
Edric. I bring a mouthful of sour news;
But if the Northmen cannot brook the truth—
Canute. Speak openly.
Edric. Then let them not believe.
The English Witan, breaking every oath
Sworn to the Dane, despatch their messengers
To Ethelred, entreating his return
From Normandy, his refuge and retreat.
They will receive him, so he govern better;
You they will outlaw.
Canute. Yet with hostages
They sealed a compact to obey King Swend.
Traitors!
Edric. Heyday! This whelp has deadly ire.
Canute. I pant for vengeance on the perjurers.
No honour, and no faith!
Hardegon. The viking spirit!
This is the ancient mood.
Edric. What means his silence?

Thororin. His eyes are sharp with lightning, and his forehead
Like a black sea-cliff on which nods the corn.
Canute. It was a bond, they gave us hostages.
By Odin, Thor, and Frey,
I swear I will exact the penalty
Of broken faith. As they have lost my trust,
Their children now shall lose hands, noses, all
That tempts the knife. Forth with the prisoners! Hack,
Lop them like saplings, make them bare of features
As woodmen leave their trees.
[THORORIN *sweeps his harp.*]
Hardegon. I hear the order
With joy;—so like old Gorm's commands, right manly,
Just, pitiless! [*Exit* HARDEGON.]
Canute. [*To* THORORIN.] Look on. There will be moods
When, with your harp, you must rehearse this scene;
My nature will require it. They are boys;
Yet—— Thororin, I will not take their lives;
Let them learn horror of their fathers' sin,
Return them branded to their infamous
Begetters. [*Exit* THORORIN.] Englishman, a bond with you
To work my cause with honesty and skill.
This Edmund—
Edric. Is a foe to circumvent.
The stripling is already on his way,
Sent by his exiled father to the Witan
With promises;—speeches will have small weight

Spoken for Ethelred, who lolls his tongue
Which way is best for scraping off the flies;
But this young prince has something in his look
So prompt and trusty—comely-faced like you,
And fresh, but more the bearing of a man.

Canute. He seeks the Witan; let him come to me,
And I will make him captain of a band
Of most efficient youths.

Edric. No menaces!
We must have patience; when he heads the army,
I promise you to draw his forces off
Under his very nose. I simply ask
A twelvemonth for his ruin. Give me time.

[*A deep cry is heard.*]

Canute. They suffer, Edric—your young countrymen.

Edric. A shifty folk, these English.

Canute. Traitors' ways!
Mine is the land; I will reconquer it,
Will ravage, leave these waving, marshy flats,
These crumbling bays, and strike into the corn.
The horse-hoof gives possession. I will ride.

Edric. Your father fell a victim to a saint;
Best get him under ground.

Canute. King Swend shall rest
At Roskild with his ancestors. Declare
Among your countrymen his death was caused
By stumbling of his horse.

Edric. Ah, no more lies,
All honesty, and yet—A vicious brute,
That flung his rider, kicked his skull, the rest

Was all delirium from injury.
I have the cue.

Canute [*pacing excitedly*]. It is my father's land:
Hath it not felt his mutilating mark
From north to south? Hath the corn e'er been reaped
He hath not trampled? Is there town or hamlet
Unblackened by his fires? Hath he not quelled
These English hinds? I will lay siege to London,
And snatch his fame from Edmund. As a tempest
Travels the kingdoms of a mighty plain,
Then breaks on one doomed spot, I will descend
On him in sudden ruin. He shall feel
In me the power and pressure of the North;
The strength of fighting Asi; all that happened
In Gorm's fierce bosom when he eyed a coast,
And the lust seized him for its ravaging.
A taunt, a challenge, and the waves are black
With dragon-fleets. I summon to my blood
The terrors of dead sea-kings.

[*Re-enter* THORORIN *and* HARDEGON.]

Hardegon. They are ready,
This English band. Will you not look on them?
As useless as old women, these fine youths.
They felt it when we lopped away their hands.

Canute [*laying his hand on his sword*]. Did I say
that? . . . I was infuriate.
You are not in the service of King Swend;
Wait till I cool ere you obey my orders.
Where lies my father? I will learn the truth,
Handle, and scan his body. Oh, to think

That there should be no wounds, no gory issue
For his tremendous soul!

Hardegon. They covered him
Most carefully, such fear was in his eye.

Canute. But I will cow this Edmund, this young Christian
Who bribes his saint for executioner.
Pull down your harp, my Thororin, the chords
May bring some colour to the dead man's cheek.
[*Aside.*] And, Hardegon, learn the full policy
Of yon ill-spoken, braggart Englishman.
When you have brought me to my father's corpse,
Look to his motives. [*Exeunt* CANUTE, THORORIN, *and* HARDEGON. EDRIC, *having overheard* CANUTE'S *last words, stretches himself on the royal chair vacated by him.*]

Edric. Look to his motives. They will be clever who get at them. I haven't a brain to hatch them. Wide-awake and no scruples—a man can do wonders by just keeping an eye on the weather-cock. Motives! They think I married the king's daughter for the sake of the blood royal—and I took her to bring down her pride with low jokes, for she once curled her lip at me. To pour one's ribaldry on a delicate princess, with the Church to tell her all is innocent in wedlock, it has been a rare pastime! But last year I had better company, the king sent me to escort his *Old Lady*, as they call her, to Normandy. She has the wit of the couple and a grace—'tis a pleasure to be near her, for she bows over your ear as softly as she would with the fellows at court. If I could

but have her for my mistress when King Ethelred has done languishing. But she is too keen and lofty. I could never cure her of her condescension, and besides I am not amorous. I like to play with fools and turn them round my fingers. There is nothing to appeal to in me —no conjuring by Odin—or our Lady. I am careful to scrape away association from fact. Significance, suggestion !—they are the bane of life. That banner floating there, they have worked a raven on it, and they worship the black image like an idol. Flap a bit of cloth in the wind, and you can lead men like sheep to the slaughter. But *I* am not gulled. That banner is to me an indifferent shred of cloth,—and everything is what it seems. I care no more for a parchment than for the leather on my shield. And this young Prince Edmund, with his open face and hope of redeeming his father's honour ! He is full of superstition and cannot thrive.

[*Re-enter* HARDEGON.]

Well, you wonder what has brought me to your master? Old statesman, it is this: your master is going to win; and I am the only Englishman who can bring my own prophecy to pass, for he will not conquer without artifice. The English prince hates cunning, so I hate him; every man likes to have employment for his faculties.

Hardegon [*aside*]. He is as ugly as foul weather at sea. Report to your young prince how we served his hostages, but don't brag you sat sprawling in my master's royal seat. It is unnatural to see you here at all. You are by rights our enemy.

Edric [*rising and yawning*]. Oh, you will not have me long a spy on your tactics. I have no particular ambition. I just rode over here as a friend to let you know what was chancing. I am indolent by nature; you must take *my* time; but you will find it worth your while to make me comfortable. Just give me fodder for my nag, and your best flavoured Danish dishes.

Hardegon. My own lads shall serve you [*aside*], and keep a watch on you too, till you turn your reins southward. Here, Harold, Ralf, an English alderman wants feeding. These youngsters will be your squires; but have a care. Return to your own folk. English faces will have to suffer now for their saint turning murderer. [*Exit* Edric *attended.*]

They were fine boys we hacked; that is a fellow wants pelting with the bones one has gnawed, till he is punched in. I would do it myself, if it were not for orders. Orders, forsooth, from my young Viking! I shall have hard times with him; he is uncertain and masterful.

[*Exit.*]

Scene II. *Malmesbury. The Orchard.*

Enter Edmund *and* Elgiva.

Edmund. Elgiva, I am come for you, my wife.
Kiss me! You come out in the orchard, sweet,
Lest envious nuns should leer at our encounter,
As the unclean at innocence. That woman
Who can bear witness of a stolen kiss
I would abandon to the rosary's

Perpetual toil; but who should brag of lovers,
New-mating lovers, as we twain, should never
Look on the sun again. Dear, we are free;
It is the summer morning of our love;
And now my little, flushing, English rose
Can open all the treasures of her breast
To the benignant air. Give me your lips.

Elgiva. I will not, Edmund; in my very sight
My lord was basely murdered. There he sat
Haughty and awkward, my great, trustful Dane,
At Edric's board. I noted that the princess
Was pale, she twitched her hand, she beckoned me
Aside, and looking up, I saw the room
Full of armed men, my husband in the midst,
Astonished, fighting with tremendous fists.
The lady pressed me to her bosom close
To hide me from the slaughter, but I broke
Away, and climbing to the casement saw
The chapel blazing where the hunted guests
Had fled for sanctuary. It is reported
That Edric is the Atheling's counsellor,
Edric—the lying tongue, the false, false lip.
I am an Englishwoman, and I cherish
My country to this plot of orchard-ground:
I would not cede an inch of English earth,
No, nor the seas, they should be English too,
With cities of strong ships. And I would love
The line of Cerdic; but I must abhor
The fitful, shifty, dismal, obstinate,
Untoward Ethelred, who damps the hopes

Of his stout, rallying subjects, who at Council,
Where men should meet for justice, planned the murder
Of my great Danish earl: and if his son
Knew of the vile intent—O Edmund, Edmund!

Edmund [*walking apart*]. Arraigned a traitor by the girl I love,
I cannot speak. I will return to her
When the last Dane is driven to his ship.
And yet, without her woman's faith, I go
Unharnessed to the field.

[*Approaching her.*]

Then you dismiss me,
Uncomforted, to raise an English band,
That will grow sullen, and refuse to fight,
As you refuse to love, because I bear
The name of Ethelred the Redeless' son?
Yet, lady, you have seen me in the midst
Of strong temptation play no miscreant's part.
That day you looked up from your wedding-veil,
I knew I was beloved. A deadly wrench!
I saw you yielded to the Danish earl,
Your precious body, the pure maidenhood,
I would have crowned with queenship, and I swore
Never again to look upon your face;
I banished you my heart's realm, nor revoked
The sentence, till this day a messenger
Told of your husband's death, and how you fled
To seek protection in these holy walls.

Elgiva. O Edmund, my great lover, my dear prince,

Speak to me, pardon me, ask o'er again
For what you asked.

Edmund. Give me those honest eyes,
Where there is nothing hidden. What a mirror!
Love, I would look down in the golden depths,
And find reflection.

Elgiva. Dearest heart, believe,
As in the orchard every part o' the tree
Is apple, from the blossom to the drooping
O' the rosy, laden branches,—you will find
No part of me, from my first, girlish joy
In your young, royal face, that is not worship.
Give me the freedom of your brow, my kisses
Long to set record there.

Edmund. The lips, the lips! [*passionately kissing her.*]
Elgiva, we are lord and lady here
I' the flecking sunlight; but Canute would rend
Our England from us.

Elgiva. He shall be repulsed;
For I have great possessions, and have suffered
To see my goodly acres in the hands
Of a sea-farer and a foreigner.

Edmund, Heir to your husband's confiscated fiefs—
Then I will seek my father, and demand
The lordships.

Elgiva. Edmund, let them be my gift;
Exact no rights. Why should men force a boon,
Grasp masterful, and take from us our joy—
To give, to give? My lands are yours for ever,
Yours with their wealth of stalwart fighting-men,

Yours for the muster, for the battlefield,
The bloodshed, and the triumph; yours at last
For pasture, blessèd as this golden sward,
When you are England's king.

[*Enter messenger.*]

Edmund. A messenger!

Elgiva. And from his aspect I believe he bears
Some weighty news.

[EDMUND *meets the messenger. They converse apart.*]

To lie down on the grass,
Look up to him, and feel he is my own!
His face grows solemn, and a majesty
Darkens his quiet eyes. [*Exit messenger.*]

Edmund. King Ethelred
Hath died in London. My true-hearted city,
Thee I possess; but of my ravaged kingdom
What part beside? The bishops, aldermen,
Are all without the walls, and will elect
The valiant young Dane who rules the north,
And 'gainst the stronghold of our English life
Presses his splendid fleet.

Elgiva. But you are king;
Shire will help shire now you are in command,
And render you their services as freely
As I confer my love; for I am England,
Who, when I doubted, would have none of you,
Who pleaded that the Dane had qualities
Meet for men's reverence; and rally now
All native forces in me to proclaim
Edmund my lord. Oh, there are faithful souls;

Trust in your people, give your heart to them,
And put for ever from your side the churl,
False-speaking Edric.

Edmund. Let him come and go;
He is ill-governed. Doubtless he fulfilled,
Murdering the Danish earl, some infamous
Plot of my father's. I shall treat him well;
The reign of vile suspicion is at end,
And honour to the fore.

Elgiva. O happy country!
I never saw this level orchard-ground
So full of gleams and shades. I am right glad
That you made love beneath the apple-trees;
They are so English, and their rosy fruit
Is plucked in tranquil, happy, autumn days,
Such as our Edmund will restore to us,
When the great wars are ended. A sweet spot!

[*Exeunt.*]

SCENE III. *London.* ETHELRED'S *corpse, on a great bed, in a large room.*

Enter EMMA.

Emma. Thou infamy, the harlots found thee fair!
Vindictive, mercenary, treacherous, vile,
A laggard, and a waverer; how well
Did nature fit thee for thine enemies,
Thy mistresses, and all corrupting things.
The worm that eats thy body will revolt
At the unvirgin soil. Yea, I will speak.

Death gives us widows opportunity
To put such questions as at judgment-day
Will rise in accusation. From my anger
Thou canst not hide; thy face is bare and fixed
Before my eyes and lips. Didst thou not sport
With other women, while I bore thee sons
With Saxon faces, boys so like their father
I loathed to give them suck, young heritors
Of thy unfeatured kingship, timid lads,
For whom I begged a refuge at the table
Of my great Norman brother? Dost thou hear?
Wilt thou not bribe me from my inquisition?
Nay, but thy Danish foe shall take thy place,
In my own inmost bower. Ah me, ah me!
Bride to the Viking! What deep modesty
Restrains me from the thought? I grew a girl,
When, from the walls of London, I looked down
On his young, glittering, tempestuous face,
And blushed, and gave him all the terms he sought
To win one smile. I look about the chamber;
Do I resign my queenship? I am fair,
My finger-tips can thrill men to their doom,
And my whole body is for empery.
I do not crave to rule; I crave to spend
The flower o' my years, my faculties, my grace,
In service of a simple, king-like man,
Clean as the ocean, and as terrible
I' the day of tempest.
[*Going up to the corpse.*] Redeless thing, thou'rt dead.
My soul peals to the echo—dead, dead, dead!

[*Enter* EDRIC.]

What brings you hither, my fair son-in-law?
Has faithful London looked upon your face,
And suffered quiet passage through her streets?
You leave the Dane?

Edric. Since you would have me give
My services to this young cub of Swend,
I give them; and report in Edmund's ear
That I am rallying forces in the north.
But for my presence—do not feign surprise;
You summoned me to bear you to the court
Of Normandy. I am obedient
To your least whim, but fear that I have journeyed
O'er hastily. I find you at your vigils.

Emma. Weeping the man who has dishonoured me.

Edric. There is a sure revenge. Now is your time
For freedom and for pleasure.

Emma. Insolence!

[*Aside, glancing toward the bed.*] I would not be his
mate in anything,
Nor re-enact his lewdness. I am free,
Free, till I love.—How fares the Danish monarch?
We met once. Edric, does he speak my name
In the same way as yours?

Edric. 'Tis never breathed
Within my hearing.

Emma. Time is in my hair.

[*Aside, taking a mirror.*] I am a matron and a queen,
and yet
There is a starving girlhood in this face,

That bitterly contrasts.

Edric. Now cheerly! Once
I named you, and he started to his feet,
Calling his men to vanquish Ethelred;
That day the foe was routed.

Emma. Thane, on you
I build my future and my blessedness.
Let not his ears forget my syllables;
Picture my destiny.

Edric. I'll make it ring.

Emma. You shall not mention me—except my pride.

Edric. A young man soon forgets.

Emma. False, false; in youth
There is a warm fidelity; all's cold
When greybeards hug the past. [*Aside.*] Oh, my beloved!

Edric. Lady, take heart. I am a counsellor
The raw, young soldier may not well despise;
And I will show him the advantage. What!
You blench; I mean I will extol the beauty
Of my fair mistress. Yet I claim reward.
Come now, a kiss.

Emma. My lips are put away
For some high festival.

Edric. You yield your hand?

Emma. As I were still a queen. It costs some pangs
To part with royalty. My blessèd crown,
My fond, familiar circlet. Ah, alas!
My hair falls unsupported by this wreath
Of gold.

Edric. A fair decline. Put this aside,
[*Touching the crown.*]
Or rather, press it to your lips, and swear
To give me of your widowhood some hours,
Ere you again are royal.

Emma. Edric, hush!
'Tis my ambition makes me amorous;
And I will give you sweeter recompense
Than any woman's favour may confer.
Share this my royal passion; make me queen,
And I will win for you the highest place
In the young Viking's trust. You will not sway
My second husband as you swayed my first;
But I have tracked allegiance in your eyes,
You feel he is your master.

Edric. Ironsides
Has valour.

Emma. And a child's simplicity;
A melancholy, brave, clear-purposed man,
Whom any knave may cozen. Let it be
Your part to circumvent him. Love the Dane,
And you shall rise in honour.

Edric. Well, I swear—
Give me your hand to print my oath upon.

Emma. Edric, refrain! My step-son at the door,
Must not behold us in close colloquy.

[EDRIC *advances to the door, and greets* EDMUND.]
Safe, safe! He has not touched me.
[*Looking toward the bed.*] Safe from *him*,
The licensed to defile. And now how sweet

My maidenhood returns on me. To fill
Some narrow convent bed in Normandy,
Dream of Canute, and all day say my prayers!
But that is not so cleansing. Oh, this love
Is a diviner power than holiness;
It puts all evil past imagining,
And crowds the soul as full as Paradise
With rapturous desires. Ah me, they come,
And I must to my tears. [*Drooping over the corpse.*]

Edric [*to* EDMUND]. You give consent,
Most noble Atheling, that I bear away
Your lady-mother to Duke Richard's court?

Edmund. She doubtless will be welcome there, and here
Adds to confusion. Take her oversea.

Emma [*half-aside*]. I cannot leave him, such a proper man
He looks, with that great brow and curling hair.
He has won many hearts.

[*Enter* EDITH *and the child.*]

Edmund. My sister comes
To pray for the great dead. Disturb her not
By more than briefest parting.

Edric. My sweet wife,
You bring our boy to look upon your sire;
May he repeat his virtues! [EDITH *shudders.*]

Edmund [*to the child, drawing him away from the bed*]. Ah, my man,
Your grandsire was so loved, when wicked Swend
Was smitten by St. Edmund, whose dear name

I bear, the English people called him home
To govern them again. They rally now
Round me, his son, your king. Down on your knees;
You rascal, do me homage!
Child [*glancing fearfully at the corpse*]. Who has made him
Like that? O father!
Edric. See the lad! He thinks
That I have power of life and death. [*Aside.*] I train him
To wither at a look. Though terrified,
He shall be forced to creep up to the corpse,
And touch it.—[*Aloud.*] Come now, kiss your grandfather.
He cannot hurt you. Never be afraid.
[*The child goes straight up to the king's body, and shrieks.*]
[*To* EDMUND.] He does whate'er I tell him; I can count
On that.—Now, sirrah, down upon your knees;
You must learn all your duty. Swear to fight
For good King Edmund.
Child. I shall be a priest,
But I will bless your armies. I am glad
That you will rule.
Edric [*to* EDITH]. I go to Normandy,
My saintly princess. To your brother's care
And your just grief I leave you. But our boy—
Edmund. I will instruct my nephew.
Emma [*embracing the child*]. Dearest child,
My infant Ethelred, thy living cheek
Shall take the print of my last English kiss;
For, oh, I cannot give my lips again

To that cold, marble brow. [*To* EDMUND.] Our elder son,
Recover our lost kingdom.

Edric. Noble prince,
I shall make haste to hear the proclamation
Of your new royalties, when this fair lady
Is rendered to her kinsman. [*Aside.*] Mark my purpose;
To rid you of the dowager means friendship,—
No step-dame on the throne!

Edmund. Lady, farewell. [*Exeunt* EMMA *and* EDRIC.]

Edith. My brother! What, together and alone
By this dear bed—to clasp you in my arms,
To feel that you are here, our country's lord
And saviour, and that no usurper's hand
Will tear our father's crown!

Edmund. Dear, send the boy
Away; his eyes are wandering fearfully,
Too shy to look upon this stranger, Death,
That puts us from our ease, who every day
Encounter him.

Edith. Go, darling, to your prayers
In the near chamber. [*Exit child.*] All the Londoners
Are staunchly yours?

Edmund. Edith, all Englishmen
Are mine; they lack a leader, but their faith
Is without flaw.

Edith. You think there will be peace?

Edmund. Hard fighting rather. We will give our blood
To these invaders, and our gold shall feed
The sick and hungry. Glorious battlefields

Shall glow upon our southern pasture plains;
Where the sheep graze such victories shall be won
As shall not need the cairn to chronicle.
Edith, I bear my people in my heart
As bard his unbreathed song.

Edith. Yet stay to mourn
Our father; he is desolate and cold.
Let me draw back the curtain.

Edmund [*looking steadfastly at* ETHELRED]. Ah, no bribes,
No hostages, *thyself*,
To pay the penalty when death exacts.
No more evasion, the straight road to hell,
And Judas' bag for thy blood-rusted gold.
Away, to the true miser!

Edith. Edmund, Edmund!
Give him your prayers; we may redeem him still.

Edmund. From his deserts? Then I shake off religion.
Heaven looks facts in the face; he sold his country,
Which in a king is as he sold his God.
He made all fearful, for he put no trust
In any man, and he has died a stranger
To life's sweet faiths and holy confidence.
He leaves a Danish heir, but honest Edric
Makes secret preparation for my rule.

Edith [*nervously caressing him*]. When we were children, and your play-fellows
Would cheat at games, you let me counsel you,
And show who played you false. As king, beware;
Lean not on Edric's love.

Edmund. Edith, your husband!
I never will be warned the damnèd way
Of vile suspicion. You misjudge the thane,
And irritate his plain, outspoken nature
With timid reticence.

Edith. One cannot love
A stranger as one loves the face one knows
As early as the sky.

Edmund. Dear heart, although
The pompous Emma from our mother's tomb
Hath turned the people's thoughts, we two possess,
Each in the other, a fair gift of hers
For keepsake and remembrance. Hast thou heard
Of my great joy? Elgiva is my wife,
And of her frank, sweet nature I will get
A race clear as the stars. Your pretty lad,
For his sake I could wish a brood of girls;
All Cerdic's majesty is in his face;
Though he is sickly. . . Alfred as a child
Was fragile, loved his missal. Never fear·
But he will make a man, though full of thought,
And blue-eyed as an angel. Comfort, love!
Will you not come along? The priests attend.
Then I must bid farewell.

[*They kiss.* *Exit* EDMUND.]

Edith. How angrily
They all turn from his pillow! In the midst
Of the great winter storms I often sighed
To be with those whom the encircling sea,
When it blew inward on our isle, submerged.

I think they will lie quiet in the deep,
Unharassed by the Judgment: no account
Is left of them; their villages and towns
Have all escaped taxation and distress;
They are no more bewildered by the dread
Of an invader;—whilst, alas! these kings
Can lay no hold upon oblivion.
There is great beauty still upon his face;
It hath not been beloved. Infirmity
Sows sorer rancour in men's hearts than crime:
I know not why. He shall have many prayers.

[*She kneels by the bed. Enter monks chanting.*]

SCENE IV. *Southampton.*

Enter CANUTE, HARDEGON, *English and Danes.*

Canute. Ye have proclaimed me king! 'Tis said at London
The citizens choose otherwise; no more
In terror of my girding troops, they give
Oaths to the untried son of Ethelred.
Where lies your loyalty? Has Ironsides
Your secret love? Or do you give your hearts
To me, receive me as your rightful lord,
Trust me to cleanse the country of all robbers,
Liars and cheats, and ever doom just dooms
Alike to rich and poor? Will ye exalt
My dignity, and follow my command,
As mindful all ye do in faithfulness
Is to your own behoof?

English. We will maintain
Our choice, and with a strict fidelity
Cleave to our King Canute.
Canute. Now ye are mine
I will re-knit your virtue, make your throne
A seat of glory. Think not whence I am;
Let Danes and Englishmen beneath my sway
Become a world-known race. Bear witness all
How I love England,—her enfolding seas,
Her woods, her valley-hayfields, river-sheds
Where cattle graze the meadows. I was born
In haunts of desolation; here abides
A sense of times gone by, of ancient law,
Religious benediction. My wild home
Seems but mere earth on which to breathe and eat;
This island has a human, blessèd bond
Between itself and men.
English. 'Tis yours to hold,
And govern as you will; we bow beneath
The dictates of your pleasure; there is nought
On earth that may resist you.
Canute [*aside*]. Flattery!
They think me a dull savage.—Ye have spoken
Beyond the truth. I bid you turn and look
Upon those billows sweeping to the shore,
With augment, arch, depression. Do you tell me
That they would stay their muster, check their onslaught
And fury of defiance at my bidding?
If you would love me, give me faithful tongues
In all you say—I have no appetite

For adulation. Go ye hence, and gather
An army meet to grapple with great Edmund :
For ye have chosen me, but your election
Hard fighting must confirm.

English. Long live the king ! [*Exeunt.*]

Hardegon. We gave these pretty Englishmen the breath of flames and the smoke of homesteads. Now it is all *excellent England.* Enemies, I take it, are as natural to a man as babes to a woman. Ghosts of the Vikings ! Would our mothers know our voices ?

Canute. I am king now in a country where there is corn-growing and the sound of bells. I must be a Christian.

Hardegon. And you know not a word of the mystery. You a Christian ! Ay, stick your great hands in your hair and redden. They'll have the laugh of you.

Canute. I will learn, I must alter. I am not simply the grand-child of Gorm. These battle-fields are just the beginning. Afterwards. . . .

Hardegon. The folly ! Rob a man of his ancestors, you take all. My best hope is to become an ancestor —no hold on posterity, if you be not a god to it. Then just think what a time it takes a bit of coast to vary ! When I sail up the fiords, the water-falls drop from the same cliff, the walls of the white steeps have not budged. And we reckon on these things. If they fail, there is no stability. I ask you, are not the gods changeless, must not divinity dwell among the old ways ?

Canute. O Hardegon, there are answers to these questions; they are coming on the waves to me. [*Looking out on the sea abstractedly.*]

[*Enter* THORORIN.]

Thororin. Listen! my harp is tuned; it shivers to praise you. I have had a great madness to sing as I saw the warriors gather, and heard the blast take your name inland.

Canute [*unheeding*]. No wisdom near me,—a dunce and a ruler! Oh, this shame of ignorance, that will not hide itself; that must come out, and suffer, and be mocked! I sob all night for the misery. 'Tis a secret that cannot be kept, yet the breaking it. . . If one loved me! [*seeing* THORORIN.] Oh, how horrible! More praise of my big sinews. I'll be sullen. [*Turns away.*]

Thororin. Deaf to my exaltation, no ear for a poet! Let me beg, Sire, you listen to my song; it is short.

Canute. And I am the subject. The insolence of these verse-makers! They would have all life a general ear for their bit of piping breath, or they stare and begin to rail. Off with you, minstrel! Thirty strophes more of your theme, or you lose your head to-morrow.

Thororin. Pshaw!—but the threat is nothing. The wind, a sand-hill, and a cry for dreams, and I am full of singing that instant.

Canute. Thirty strophes, and stuffed with comparisons and reverence. [*Exit* THORORIN.]

Hardegon. How he twirls his finger round the flames on his lip, all impatience for me to go. He has a sea-bred face. 'Tis a shame for the true, old things to lose him. I will bring one who can speak—with a voice that is like the rush of water from amid the foam of her hair—Gunhild, the prophetess.

[*To* CANUTE.] Strange, you should have taken to fretting, and all since the siege of London! [*Exit.*]

Canute. All, all since then. Ah, yes! Above me bent
A sweet, soft-shouldered woman, with supreme,
Abashing eyes, and such maturity—
The perfect flower of years—such June of face . . .
So ceremonious, and yet so fearless
In passionate grace, that I was struck with shame,
And knew not where I was, nor how to speak,
Confounded to the heart. She made me feel
That I was lawless and uncivilized,—
Barbarian! In all my brave array
I shrank from her, as she had caught me stripped
For some brute pastime. Is this womanhood?
There's more to see each time one looks at her,
There's music in her; she has listened much,
Pored o'er the lustrous missals, learnt how soft
One speaks to God, with silky filaments
Woven weird pictures of the fates of men.
Her smile is not a new-born thing, 'tis old,
And mellow as the uncut, timeless jewel.
Her forehead's runic,—it is just *to-day*
On other faces, but this lady's brows
Are full of fond tradition and romance.
I'll be her scholar, she shall teach me all,
And change—yea, as I love her, I am changed
In my ambition, in my appetites,
In my blood, and aspiration. [*Turning to some parchments.*] For her sake
I wrestle with these laws. My eyes are dim,
Worn out with gazing, and my brain is slow
To take the import. Sometimes on my vessel

When my dull brain is drowsy with the salt,
I muse on this new wisdom, till its weight
Oppresses me with slumber, as it rises
In such great bulk before me.

[*Reads the parchments, sitting.*]

[*Re-enter* HARDEGON *with* GUNHILD.]

Hardegon. At his learning!
Deal with him, spare him not.

Canute. Whom hast thou brought?
A brooding face, with windy sea of hair,
And eyes whose ample vision ebbs no more
Than waters from a fiord. I conceive
A dread of things familiar as she breathes.

Gunhild. O king.

Canute. Ay, Scandinavia.

Gunhild. He sees
How with a country's might I cross his door;
How in me all his youth was spent, in me
His ancestors are buried; on my brows
Inscribed is his religion; through my frame
Press the great, goading forces of the waves.

Canute. Art thou a woman?

Gunhild. Not to thee. I am
Thy past.

Canute. Her arms are knotted in her bosom
Like ivy-stems. What does she here, so fixed
Before my seat?

Gunhild. Hearken! I wandered out
Among the brake-fern, and the upright flags,

And snatching brambles, when the sun was gone,
And the west yellow underneath the night.
A fir-bough rolled its mass athwart my way,
With a black fowl thereon. All eve I stood
And gathered in your fate. You raise your hands
To other gods, you speak another tongue,
You learn strange things on which is Odin's seal
That men should know them not, you cast the billows
Behind your back, and leap upon the horse.
You love no more the North that fashioned you,
The ancestors whose blood is in your heart :—
These things you have forgotten.

Canute. Yes.

Gunhild. But they
Will have a longer memory. Alas,
The mournfulness that draws about my breasts !
Woe, Woe ! There is a justice of the Norn,
Who sings about the cradle.

Canute. Speak thy worst.

[*Aside, rising and pacing apart.*] How different my queen ! How liberal
The splendour of her smile ! This woman's frown
Is tyrannous. So will my country look,
When I sail back next year ; for I shall feel
A dread, a disappointment, and a love
I loathe, it comes up from so deep a well,
Where I am sod and darkness.

Gunhild. At thy birth
Sang Urd of foregone things, of thy wild race,
Of rocks and fir-trees that for ages past

Stood in thy native bounds, of creeping seas,
That call thy countrymen to journey forth
Among strange people; and her song went on
As flesh was woven for thee in the womb;
It cannot be forgotten, for she sang
Beginnings.

Canute. O grey-headed tyrannies
Of yore, I will escape you.

Gunhild. Verily,
They have requital. Thou wilt get a child:
Will it not draw from the deep parts of life;
Will it not take of thee that disposition,
Old as the hills, and as the waterfall,
Whose foam alone was ever seen by man?
Thou wilt produce a being of thy past,
And all thy change avail not.

Hardegon. How these women
Can sing foundations!

Canute. If in those I breed
It work no blessing, to myself this new,
Unsettled energy within my brain
Is worth all odds. I cannot understand
Half that is meeting me. Go hence, your face
Is sheer confusion to me; it brings back
The load of ignorance, the brutishness,
The fetters of nativity.

Gunhild. I go:
But wrathful leave behind me what was told
When the crow bent from the swirled plume of fir,
And held me like a statue.

Canute. O my past,
I loved thine aspect once, but now my mind
Drives thee away. It seems to me that thought
Is as a moving on along the air—
I cannot yet find language. You oppress,
And hinder me; but when I brood alone,
Hope stirs, and there is tumult of a joy,
That flashes through my nature, like a sword,
Cutting the knots.
Gunhild. Oh, indestructible
Are the first bonds of living. Fare thee well.
Thou wilt engender thine own ancestry;
Nature will have her permanence.
Canute. And I
Will have my impulse.
Gunhild. Oh, the blue fir-bough,
The bird, the fern, and iris at my feet!
The whole world talks of birth, it is the secret
That shudders through all sap. [*Exit.*]
Canute. She turns away
With rigid shoulders, and is vanishing
For ever. 'Tis in wrestles with her like
We are transformed.
[*To* HARDEGON.] Call Edric, do you hear!
And say no other word as you would live;
My temper will not bear it. [*Exit* HARDEGON]
Winsome queen,
Emma, great lady, could I reach thy feet,
Thou hadst ne'er known such homage. It is youth,
Youth in its awful kindling; it is love,

When all the body is possessed by want
Of what it would be worthy of;—such youth,
Such love I give thee. Deeper than my race,
Deeper than all my past thy sway is set;
So able are thy brows, such strength is thine,
Thou art beneath all other elements,
They are no more the same. Oh, wonderful!
For I have clipped a woman in my arms,
The silent Elfgifu, my Danish wife;
And I have known the pleasures, but they passed;
I was not altered; in my head no light,
No current through my faculties, no whirl
Of giddy charm.

[*Enter* EDRIC.] Edric, you are the man;
You have the opportunity that chance
Withholds from me.

Edric [*aside*]. He tramps about and catches
His garment's hem, a burning in his eyes.—
Speak out, and plainly.

Canute. Ha!—The troops come in?
Do they not muster? I am thinking, Edric,
'Tis time now for my tactics, for the plan
Of conquest and repulse. You'll find me keen,
And ready as a captain.

Edric. I could swear
You have resource. You are a soldier's son,
And know how valid is the right of craft
Toward foemen.

Canute. Yes, to take them unawares
By artifice and ambush. Look you, thane,

I must possess this kingdom. I am moved
To actions of vast consequence, and need
Space for great laws, the power to mould a nation
To flawless homage. What the means you choose
I care not; anything I hold as just
That will establish justice.

Edric. So I think.

Canute [*aside*]. My breath draws back her name from
off my tongue;
I cannot utter it.

Edric. The army grows,
The *Raven* flaps for victory, my pate
Teems with its stratagems. Soon will you be
A single ruler; though perchance you'll ask
Another for *her* company. [*Aside.*] He's red,
As if the northern light leapt through his face;
Ho, ho! Can't keep his counsel.—Is your mind
Set on the empire of a bachelor?
You own too hot a pulse.

Canute. I have no doubt
But I shall marry.

Edric. Where's the wife to match
An eagle of your plumage?

Canute. All the world
Is full of stately women.

Edric. I have seen
But one, the late king's widow. She is prime
Among all dames.

Canute. You think that you have seen her,
Because you know she has a radiant skin,
And strange, proud eyes!

Edric. Ah, you are touched, young man!
But she is twice your age.
Canute. She is beloved
Past any other woman, who was dear
In former times. She holds her century's
Most choice attainments.
Edric. Will it flatter you
To learn that she would throw away her veil,
Her husband being buried but a week,
To kiss that lip of yours?
Canute. Impossible!
A brute like me, a child in all but strength,
A Christian but in name, her enemy,
A spoiler, temple-burner, pirate,—she,
Wise, excellent in grace.
Edric. Yet she is yours,
With all a woman's haste; you are the theme
On which she spends her wisdom.
Canute. Such a moment—
My future—
Edric. He is deaf to what I say.
All fire and trembling, ho!
Canute. My fate is turned
Like a great river from its primal bed
Round by new thorpes and fields. My thankfulness
Is this: she stoops to love me, but a man
Grows up within me she may proudly call
Her lover. Edric, I will never ask
The honour of her fairest hand, will never
Take from her lips the glory of a kiss,
Till I am firmly king.

Edric. I'll drop some words
To keep her merry, she will bide her time;
Women can wait by nature.

Canute. Scheme, have ready
Arms and provision. I will go elsewhere,
And study. Read this passage from the scroll;
The language puzzles me. It runs—

Edric. Like this—

If a man be slain, we estimate all equally dear at forty talents of pure gold.

Canute. These laws will I remodel, when I read
The meanings plainly. They shall be enforced
Through the land's length and breadth; and he who kills
Pay the due sum. [*Aside.*] I must out to the air,
And splash of the full tide. My joy as yet
Is lightning, thunder in my sense, a storm
Knit up to break in fury.—Give me this,
That parchment, and let no one follow me.

Edric. A word of dalliance, a sugared speech
To carry to the widow, come!

Canute [*aside*]. The fool!
I cannot speak.—Take her my silence, thane.

[*Exeunt severally.*]

ACT II.

SCENE I. *Assandun. The English army on high ground above the river Crouch. The Danish army on lower ground, moving with booty toward their ships.*

Enter EDMUND.

Edmund. Under the royal ensign I await
The Danish onslaught; but I fear the cowards
Refuse to grapple, and with robber-stealth
Are slinking to their ships. Can I remain
Here in my strong position on the hill,
And see the wealth of ravaged Mercia borne
To pirate vessels? [*Enter* EDRIC.] Edric, you mistake
The English keep the heights; your Danish chieftain
Is skulking with his booty to the shore.

Edric. Now what a temper! I have grown so artful
In tactics that you take me for a spy;
Yet in your six great battles I have helped,
As if I stood beside you,—veered about,
Given your foes false hope, and spurred them on,
Then back to my true post. As for my motive
In joining you to-day, I tell you plainly,
I acted from a passion in my veins
That drove me hither. In the foreign herd
I could not tarry.

Edmund. It was natural,
Your country in such peril. I rejoice
To have you by my side, and thus to turn you
From action that discomforted my mind,
And often stained your honour. Look below.

Canute is marching by the river-bed,
Laden with plunder: we must intercept:
He shall not carry my dear England's wealth
Of corn and cattle to the fallow ocean.
In proof of trust I give you your old troops,
The stalwart Mercian bands; but, Streona,
Let there be honest fighting. All my soul
Abhors deceit. It ill becomes a Christian,
An Englishman, to play his wits against
A rude, untutored warrior.

Edric. To-day
I show you my true colours; you shall learn
My inner disposition.

Edmund [*to his army*]. Englishmen,
Attack those recreants hastening to the sea;
Hard hand-play give the robbers, beat them off
From shelter of their boats. Your fathers' spirit
Make ye defenders of the land, its fame,
Its homes, its ancient crown. Think of the days
When Alfred rose among ye, how he smote
The northern hosts, and drove them from his fields.
Ye have been faithful to me, and have followed
The hurry of my marches, borne scant fare,
Tempest, and cold, and weariness. Together
Six times have we encountered on the plain
Yon scowling mariners, and God has given
A measure of success. With rush of banners,
Descend, and strike them as a thunder-bolt. [*Exeunt.*]

[*On the lower ground enter* CANUTE, HARDEGON, THORORIN, *and Danes.*]

Hardegon. The enemy is on us and our ranks

Waver and break; they would not thus have faltered
If Swend had marshalled them; he stood so tall,
And bellowed out his orders.
Thororin [*waving the Danish flag*]. Let them see
The glorious sign—our Raven's open beak,
And wings that flap triumphant in the wind!
Good is the omen; when those plumes are stirred
The hour is come for fated warriors
To fall beneath the battle-axe.
Canute. Stand firm!
Give them no inch of ground. Though young in years,
My father trained my hands to slaughter, filled me
With great ambition for the raging field,
Its noble chances. In this valley's breadth
Free space is given. Manfully resist.
[*Re-enter* Edmund, *and English.*]
Edmund. I sought you through the ranks. I know your helm,
And fierce, bright eyes. You are the Danish chief.
Canute. The king of England.
Edmund. I deny the name
To any stranger in whose alien veins
The blood of Cerdic flows not. The great title
Is mine by birthright and election.
Canute. I
Have half the country's voice; my father swayed
These lands before me. I will have my own.
We'll speak together with the noise of swords;
That talk may have an issue.
Edmund. So it shall.
[*Strikes at* Canute *vehemently. Exit.*]

Hardegon. Danes, to your king! His shield is cut in twain.

Canute. Back, fools; must I be cheated of revenge!
He goes, and I am left with cloven arms,
Abased and powerless.

Hardegon. Odin, how they press us!
Retreat, or we are lost.

Canute. God only knows
Which shall be master; I will wait the end,
And then myself cut down my clouded youth,
If I am vanquished. Curse that heavy blow;
It stunned me like a giant. Down it crashed,
And brought a darkness after it.

Thororin. My king,
A cruel fortune works against our powers;
Our fighting men, who struggle with set teeth,
Are beaten. I am weary, sick of war.
To see the hostile folk upon our track,
Hewing behind our fugitives!

Canute. The English
Are now disturbed; for, with a whirlpool's sweep,
Half of their army swings round to our side.
Ah, it is Edric! He will save the day;
He has deserted. Shout your welcome loud;
Pour forth your darts, and speed your death-spears 'gainst
The trapped and yielding English.

[*Re-enter* EDRIC.]

Edric. You may fight,
But I defeat them with my trickery.
They cannot stand against me. All is lost

For them; for you, all gained.

Canute. Hack, slay, o'erwhelm! [*Exit.*]

[*The English and Danes fight desperately.*]

An Englishman [*pointing to* EDRIC]. There is the traitor, the deceiver. Shame!

The curse of ignominy take the wretch;
May his own snares entrap him!

Another. As we fall
Our race disowns him. See, from our last glances
The devil shrinks, and turns. Comrades, farewell.

Another. Farewell, for we must perish, if we stand.

[*The English are slain. Exeunt Danes and* EDRIC.]

* * * * *

[*Enter* EDMUND.]

Edmund. Late, and so many slain! A narrow kingdom,
But yet of honest souls. Oh, I could stoop,
And kiss them, as a woman, one by one.
The brave, blue eyes! Each step a recognition.
Ulfcytel, Wulfsige! My Ethelweard!
I would keep watch beside you, did no remnant
Wander the darkness for King Edmund's voice.
Brave hearts still ache for me. It is enough!
I will divide my kingdom with my foe;
We will rule neighbour chieftains. And Canute
Shall feel the virtue of my severed lands
Pass through his blood? It is impossible;
What barrier could divide us? If a river
Were made the confine, I would breast the current;
Or if the pleasant ranges of clear down

Defined my border I should clamber them,
And look forth coveting the golden tracts
O' the other side. Impenetrable forest
Must block me from the view. God's hand hath set
The limit of my empire in the sea ;—
I bear His finger-mark across the sand,
It chafes not ;—but wherever English voices
Gladden the breeze, there should be deep accord
In custom, purpose, hope. [*Turning to the dead.*]
I have a people
Will none of the invader ; all my best
Are here. How simply they laid down their lives !
An Englishman sleeps soundly in his death,
As fearing no ill vision. Not a man
Found faithless ; this is Heaven's great reward. [*Exit.*]

[*Re-enter by torchlight* CANUTE, EDRIC, HARDEGON, THORORIN, *and Danes.*]

Edric. Pooh, pooh ! You say 'tis no clear victory :
Look at this heap of Edmund's subjects—all
Of note about the court.

Canute [*looking wistfully at the dead*]. And goodly faces !
Here is a churchman. What a noble brow,
So full of thought and sweetness ! These are creatures
To stand about a throne.

Hardegon. The soil breeds English,
And Edmund lives.

Canute [*impetuously*]. This day shall end the war ;
Peace, treaty, or division of the land—

Soldier [*behind*]. Hark ye! Edmund gave our king a drubbing; the place hurts, so no more encounters. He's meek as a beaten man; yet we sweated all day for him.

Canute [*striking him*]. And duly
Receive your wage, you braggart,—a king's blow
To strike you into silence.

Hardegon. Bravely done!

Thororin. He is stone-dead. This deed shall be recounted.

> Down sank the dastard,
> He the defamer;
> Fierce Canute felled him,
> Fearful in might.
> There lies he lifeless,
> Lost to his mother;
> Bloodless on battle-field,
> Branded with shame.

Canute. This blinding flicker of the torch! Sweep down
The flame across his face, so!—He is stunned.
God! but his look has hardened. Thororin,
Stoop, find the breath.

Thororin. It will not come again;
The blow was fatal,—a swift punishment.

Canute [*muttering*]. Punishment, punishment! and the crime faithful speaking; it is the false tongue wants stopping.

[EDRIC *moves away, examining the corpses.*]

That Edric—faugh!—I hate to see him fingering the dead. Once he laid his impudent hand on my

shoulder. I have no pleasure in these victories; they are the gift of his treachery; I have not won them. All the great English are here, dead and loyal; and the knave spoke true, I am no match for their king.
[*Aside.*] You talk of punishment. By English law
A mulct of forty talents is the sum
Due from a man who murders in hot blood;
But from a king, thrice guilty, triple fine
Shall be exacted. I will make amends;
We are no more barbarian. Give this fellow
An honourable burial; recount,
My Thororin, the sequel of my passion.
I will to meditation. [*Exit.*]

[*As* CANUTE *retires, an English messenger is seen approaching his tent.*]

Thororin. Write the end!
Impossible! The Viking is a Christian,
And the great virtue of revenge is dead.
I sing the fiery current of the blood,
Its rapids, its revulsions. Let him learn
The mournful metres of tear-dropping women,
And mourn each mighty deed.
Hardegon. I give him up.
Great men can get the virtue out of good
And wickedness; they know that right and wrong
Work well together. I have seen old Gorm
Cry like a baby, but no whit the worse
Next day, and ready for a massacre.
This lad is hopeless; he will come to terms.

[*Re-enter* EDRIC.]

Here is his enemy, a man to crumble,
And eat into his soul.—What brings you here?
You seek for your old master 'mong the dead?
You will not find him, so best spare your pains.

Edric. Well, it would have saved trouble; he will scarcely take me into favour again,—but it is with my new master I must parley. I am the hero of the day. He owes everything to me; and I and my Mercian troops look for reward. I want money and dignities. Ah, there is the royal tent. Just tell our young conqueror I must break on his privacy. [*Exit* HARDEGON.] The dogged, old creature!—but I sent him trudging on my errand. Now I come to a bit of work I shall relish. This high-bred sea-king thinks he can use me contemptuously. He shall be my dependent. He has a notion of keeping faith; and the oaths he shall break! Oh, it rejoices me to dye folks my own colour, and to see them wince at the discovery of their vileness. You can do it easily with a woman. But it is difficult to menace a keen man, with a conscience, and intrepid. I must convince him he owes everything to me; and a just king rewards his servants; ingratitude is the part of a barbarian. He shall set me in the rank and place I like to name, and then I can degrade him step by step. I will force him to look inwards when he feels contempt. That is how I dominate.

[*Re-enter* HARDEGON.]

Hardegon. The king is musing; you would interrupt.

Edric. The king! He must wait for that title. Then you tell him, if he does not choose to converse with me—

[*Re-enter* CANUTE *wildly.*]

Canute. Edric, come hither ; I shall need your service. King Edmund has sent to propose that we divide the land. I could win it back for myself with my sword ; but your hireling soldiers damp enterprise. There would be no more honour in the war ; I could never trust my men again, after they had been in the company of your vile, flattering Mercians. There would be nothing but ill-luck and treachery, so we had best make a covenant, and keep *that.* Within a week we meet at Olney. I do not know the country. Where lies the fosse ?

Edric. Ha, ha ! Again at fault ! I must fight his battles, then prescribe his policy. Wanted at every turn. But thanks first, and wages. Let us wipe off the old score.

Canute. Stop that bluster, you recreant ! The day would have been ours without your knavery. Our men had begun to rally, and the Raven gave the sign.

Edric. Just fancy ! the gods were favourable. What a pity I passed into your ranks with weapons. I forgot what a young one you are. If the banner floated right, you did not need recruits. Well, Edmund is a man ; if I had kept firm to him, to-night we should have divided the spoil. And the Mercian booty too your pirates were making off with—that would all have been mine !

Canute. You shall be well rewarded. But, Edric, I would have proved myself a soldier. I did not conquer. The field is mine through an artifice.

Edric. The result pleases you,—the issue. Scarcely anything is fit to look at in the process. I am preparing

for your glory; leave me a little to myself. As for the boundary-line, we will not hurt our brains with calculations; they are all artificial. A bit of blue sea is the border of our empire, and, if I recollect, it is the royal Danish colour. But come in, come in! I must look to your affairs. If I had not wheeled round to your ranks— [*Moving towards the royal tent.*]

Canute. There lie your people. Be careful: do not trample friends' faces on your way to my tent. These are all English we are passing; you should know every man by name.

Edric. As I was saying, if I had not given you my forces, young man, I should have been saved this business of halving the kingdom. I am indispensable. So no retort. [*Exeunt.*]

SCENE II. *Olney.** *An island in the Ouse.*

Enter CANUTE, EDRIC, HARDEGON, THORORIN, *and Danes.*

Canute. Edmund is late in coming. It is grey
O'er head, and sluggishly the river swims,
And laps up its own sound into itself,
As cattle are contented with their cud.
The noises of these English streams are low
After the cry of torrents. Thororin,
Yon willow-roots grow in fat peace along,
Not like the striving pines. Edric, I own

* The historical meeting took place at Olney—an island in the Severn.

To some rejoicing I am here the first;
It gives me sense of full possession. Mind you,
I do not think this treaty will endure;
Our hosts are tired, and we consent to slumber
Till one of us awakes.

Edric. Or not.—He stares
Across the river. Did he take the hint?
His swift glance was uncertain.

Canute [*aparl*]. Now they shout;
The boat is launched: it is a hateful moment.
[*To* EDRIC.] Why do you slip behind me?

Edric. But to show
I am your servant.

Hardegon. 'Tis to hide that face.

Canute. He is not yet in sight, no glimpse,—yon isle
Of waving grass so blocks the view. My Danes
In rows are grimly silent. Thororin,
You love the headlong rapids of the North:
They fall too sudden; one could never build
Beside them, never stablish governments
In their rude neighbourhood. Edric, he comes;
I see vast shoulders moving through the rushes.
Would I might never meet him!

Edric. Why?

Canute. No matter.

Edric. Something has caught your eye among the Danes.
Vexed?

Canute. 'Tis that woman sitting on the slope,

With streaming locks and wind-distended raiment:
One fierce hand tugs the grass, the other draws
A tress of hair through her uncertain mouth;
Her narrowed, eager eyes are fixed on me;
They call her Gunhild; long have I defied her.
Why is she here?

Edric. To see the spectacle;
All women love to gape at pageants. Now
Edmund is on the stream; the oars are splashing
Among the weeds. Heigh! He has got my child
Against his side.

Canute. Noble to glance at, worn,
Though stronger built than I! He cleft my shield;
It has not been avenged. A placid look:
Much like his country's. Ah, the hateful thought,
It makes me feel a stranger, though I call
Half England mine. He smiles at that fair boy
Dipping his palm,—an honest, brightening pleasure
Straight from the eyes. He sees me, and the king
Comes forward on his face. I must prepare
A welcome.

Edric [*aside, glancing at* CANUTE]. Ho, his pride! At handy-dandy
He cares not to be first. My Dane's full lip
Is sulky, in his eyes a sullen gleam.
I cannot reach his mood. Best keep behind.

[*Enter* EDMUND, *the child, and an English train.*]

Edmund Hail, brave Canute. That you have met my terms
I thank your generosity; forget

The strife between us. With clear boundaries,
And heavy payment to your fleet, I settle
Beside you as a brother in this isle.
I am an Englishman, and, once at peace,
All grudge and wrath are over. There's my hand.

Canute. I like your speech, King Edmund. There is mine.
All England lying southward of the Thames,
East Anglia and Essex are your realm;
Mine what is left.

Edmund. A mighty stretch of kingdom!
Such the agreement. Now, before all men,
Clear-hearted before God, I swear an oath
Of friendship and of brotherhood to one
Whom I have tried in battle as a man,
And would, as king, be bound to.

Edric. In a trice
Canute is clearing, and a sudden touch
Of sun lights up his scowl.

Canute. I, too, will swear
With a good heart; the heavens seal a vow
That I will live your brother. [*Aside.*] In his grasp
There is such amity.

Edmund. My arms and mantle
Take as a pledge that I am wholly yours
In purpose and affection.

Canute. Take my shield,
My sword, my robe, great Edmund.
[*They exchange clothes and weapons.*]

Edric. It is time

I gave my brat a kiss, and showed myself
With insolent composure. Well, young pup!
[*The child recoils, and clings to* EDMUND'S *hand.*]
Canute. Is this your son? [*Aside.*] Who shrinks
away from him,
As culprit from the touch of burning shares.
It makes me hate the man.
Edmund. Ah, Edric, you!
To-day annuls offences, and you chose
To serve the better master.
Edric. With your pardon,
I venture to declare I was your friend
When I forsook you; I discerned the future
Must be a compromise, and how to hasten
This reconciling hour.
Edmund. My ears are shut.
[*To* CANUTE.] Brother, farewell. May we so grave the
vows
Which we have made deep in our memory,
That God may call us faithful when we join
Before His face hereafter.
Canute. Let me take
King Edmund to his boat.
Edmund. A gracious offer.
Thororin. Hateful to see him by his enemy,
In this flat place, amid rank grass, and mud,
And sated, yellow lilies.
Edmund [*to the child*]. Come, my boy.
Child. Look, uncle Edmund, at the bulrushes;
How huge they stand.

Edmund. Here is a goodly spike;
I'll cut it down, and arm you with a lance.
Child. My father gives me weapons; let it drop.
Edmund. Nay, grasp it like a man! This noble king
Will think our little English boys are cravens,
If a reed makes them tremble.
Canute. Edric's child!—
Not featured like his father.
Edmund. In each trait
His mother's gentle self. [*To the child.*] Now jump aboard.
[*To* CANUTE.] Good-bye, this honour pleases me, so well
I love my valiant compeer. I am staunch,
Canute, when I may trust.
Canute. Brother, farewell.
[*Exeunt* EDMUND, *the child, and English.*]
A king in sooth, he looks imperial,
And royal London owns him as her lord.
Edric [*stealing up behind*] My liege, your eye moves wistfully across
To Edmund's train: there cannot be two kings;
There shall not.
Canute. Edric, put no evil thoughts
Into my heart. He is a goodly man,
This Edmund, sworn my brother; in his robe
I stand.
Edric. Invested in his majesty?
Canute. For I have none to give him in exchange.
How grew he thus? His father was a fool.
Edric. His step-dame counts him as her enemy;

Your crown were well established, she at home
Once more in her old place.
Canute. I feel the time
Is come to knot our passion. Seek her presence,
Ask her by all she loves in England, all
She covets, by her solitude, her beauty,
Wreathless and disenthroned, to cross the sea,
And take back everything.
Edric. A husband, yes;
But her old kingdom also?
Canute. Thororin,
Carry this borrowed cloak; it fits me ill.
Edric. It hampers you; it is too large.
Canute. His arms,—
Rid me of all. And half the land is mine:
I am not king to eastward and to south,
And that clear ocean-marge my father's right,
And heritage by conquest shall be *his?*
[*Pacing apart.*] How if I whisper murder to this vile,
Mean-hearted alderman? . . . My word, my oath!
If that great lady would come back, she is
So fearful an enchantress, might I take her
To wife—then, as the lucky figure-head,
That speeds the sea-king to his victory,
She would ensure me monarch absolute.
I noted how she kept her smile alit
When she was thwarted—and her ancient hate
For Edmund! But with him my faith is sworn.
[*Turning.*] Why do you cast your leg along that willow,
As if to ponder, Edric?

Edric. I would sleep,
And dream your dreams.
Canute. What?
Edric. Nay, your face knows all.
Canute. Where is that woman?
Thororin. When she saw you leave
Edmund for Edric's company, she bounded,
And plucked the grass, and threw it on the stream,
And turned home full of smiles.
Canute. I almost think
I hate this river-bed. Quick, ferryman!
We'll pass these segs and flowering rushes by,
And reach the stable pastures. Edric, come;
Brown-study wastes your time.
Edric. At my good pleasure.
Thanks, thanks!
Canute [*to* THORORIN]. My bard, be ready with your harp;
I need the sound of seas and cataracts.

[*Exit, with his followers.*]

Edric. As for me, I will just look about. Providence will direct me. I am lazy; I must have leisure, and to plot murders is a real toil to the brain. Yon heron drops by instinct his long neck into the water, when the fish is under his bill. Meanwhile he is contemplative. But the Old Lady will never rest till she has King Edmund's head in a charger. Though it be fine sport to inveigle him, the decoy-duck is not yet found. There is no chance of *my* luring him into a gin; and his kinsfolk and acquaintance, followers, friends, sister, wife, *nephew*,

all dote on him. I have it!—nice, tame, and such an innocent. Eh, the lad can draw him to the cage. But slow, slow, my sludge-river; we need time.

SCENE III. *The Danish quarters at Northampton. Enter* CANUTE *and* EMMA. *A crowd of Normans and Danes is seen retiring.* EMMA *seats herself in the royal chair.* CANUTE *stands abashed before her.*

Emma. And now we are together.—O my king,
Is it not I that crowned thee? Streona,
Whom I, in all things, have the shaping of,
Hath thrice at my command waylaid the life
Of Edmund, thine arch-enemy. He drew
The English from their leader, left thee lord,
And victor of the field. Did I not first
See thee in London, at the siege? We took
Counsel together, you and I apart;
That day we settled kingdoms. Dear my lord,
Now tell me wherefore thou would'st mate with me,
Who am a wife, and mother of young kings,
To whom the crown upon this brow is but
A jewel repossessed, who must enact
The past in all things, unto whom you can
Reveal no wonder, give no morning gift
I shall not smile at as familiar? Say,
My handsome Dane, my sea-king, O my love,
Bright as the prow-head of thy fairest fleets,
Why did you choose me, when Duke Richard's girls,
My brother's children, stitch their broidery,

And sigh for lovers,—why? Am I not old,
The ancient lady of these realms, and thou
A rank invader, who hast exiled me,
Distressed my husband, driven out my bairns,
Ravaged my lands? There should be enmity
Between us. Wherefore dost thou bring me here,
Where naturally, from long habitude,
I take the throne, as grand-dame by the fire
Her honoured corner in the ingle-nook?
What wilt thou with me, young barbarian,
Who with so many wiles of courtesy
Hast brought me over seas? The rumour is
Thou wilt espouse me,—if for policy,
Thou'lt rue it; if, Canute, it be for love. . . .
Why would'st thou wed me?

Canute. Lady, I have lived
A ruthless warrior, but love the things
Of peace and order. I have slain, and burnt,
And mutilated, and have loathed myself,
Yea, loathed the savagery. I would restore
To England all her holy usages,
Her laws, her Church, the treasures of her shrines,
And, chief, the lady who has gemmed her crown,
Her ever-honoured Lady Elfgifu.

Emma [*aside*]. It is not then my beauty.—Why, there is,
I hear, another Elfgifu, the child
Of murdered Aldhelm. Thou hast sons by her.
Oh, tell me, are they like thee? Do they stamp
In spring's eternity thy radiant brows;

Is there young kingship in them? I have children
So like their father, I have flung them off,
For they recall the great misgovernance
Of Ethelred the Redeless past the term
Of my maternal patience. I am true
In marriage, fair usurper. My two lads
Will bear the characters of Cerdic's line,
If they inherit. But this Elfgifu,
The lady of Northampton, speak of her.
Say, will you cast away the things she calls
Your sons, and trust the future sole to me,
Who, for your sake, relinquish all my right
In well-begotten Edward and the young
Alfred his brother? What of Elfgifu?
You hesitate.

Canute. Her name shall be forgotten;
Her boys shall rule the far, barbarian lands;
But for this England, that I love as mine,
I will beget, lady, a kingly son,
And you shall be his mother.

Emma [*sobbing*]. Oh, my lord,
I would I could unearth the buried past,
To look it in the face and mock at it,
Then fling it out as refuse. I, for you,
Do so obliterate my loathèd days;
They are dark to me, imageless, unknown,
As the nine months before I saw the light,
And I in heart a virgin come to you,
A queenly virgin, *Gem of Normandy*—
So say the writers. Dost thou find it so?

Canute, had I been ta'en thy spoil in war,
How had'st thou served me? Had'st thou said, *She's fair,*
But worn, I'll give her to my eldest chief;
And turned to some soft, dimpled child, with eyes
That stare at love as at a pageantry,
That awes and dulls them; or, more circumspect,
Had'st thou espoused me, and with Elfgifu
Spent thy unlawful hours?

Canute. Had'st thou been brought
In all thy dazzling beauty to my knees,
I had not given thee thy liberty;
I had commanded thou should'st braid thy hair
In wifely coronets; and thou with me
Had'st made strong covenant thou would'st keep faith
Till death should part us.

Emma. When I bear a boy—
As doubt not this my joy in thee shall take
Its form in flesh, that thou may'st see how deep
It enters in my nature, spite my years;—
When our young Dane is born, thou wilt confer
On him all English royalties?

Canute [*throwing himself at her feet and clasping her hand*]. All, *all.*
Yet, my enchanting queen, see that he show
Some traces of his mother. If you crave
That I should dote on him, he must not be
A simple warrior, but of courtly grace,
Compelling charm, accomplished in all arts,
Loving the harp, a gentle-mannered king,
Lavish to learning.

Emma. Mother to a monk!
Is child-bed labour for the tonsure? Whew!
My Danish son shall war, burn, ravage, slay,
Never break faith, never buy off with gold
His country's enemies, despise all guile,
And, like a man, sin, harry, and pursue,
Till all is under foot.

Canute. Then must you give
A daughter to me, that these clear, keen eyes
A second time subdue a conqueror,
And give us broad dominion. Noble lady,
How bountiful and blessèd you must be,
Thus to forget my many injuries,
And give me promise of an empire, rich
In heirs and kingdoms,—rich to me in this [*passionately embracing her*],
My Norman gem, Emma, my Elfgifu.
My stately England. Come, thou art my queen.

Emma. And beautiful?

Canute [*drawing back*]. You must not sting my blood.
Oh, you will learn.—I struggle with my awe;
I have known sack and pillage. Should I take you
As a man takes the woman he desires—
I cannot speak. Mine, mine!

Emma. You are afraid
To touch me. What, you tremble!

Canute. Emma, think!
I hold back by the jaws a savageness
Of inbred nature. And a fear of shame,
Of uttering dishonour to my love,

My worship of you, makes me almost stone,
And courteous like a host. You should not ask me
If you are beautiful. All charms of earth,
All that draws waves to shore, all influence
Of stars or sun are in your face, and quiver
In me as I behold it.

Emma. You should woo
Trusting my courage. Speak to me of fear
In love—

Canute. The taunt is perilous.

Emma. As well
Face a great warrior with dissuasive words :
We will not meet ; we are not matched in skill.
From stripling's mouth such words are vanity,
They show the arrant craven.

Canute. For your sake
I wrestled to become a Christian lover ;
You challenge my fierce past ; you have no mercy.
I'm made of primal stuff. You do not know.

Emma. My heart is like the magnet, unalarmed
At its completest triumph.

Canute. Cruel queen,
You go the way to make me cold with terror,
And powerless to approach you. Give your voice
Its softest resonance ; 'twill win me back
To love, to warmth, and confidence. O Emma,
It was your sovereign culture, and your tones,
Almost religious in their loveliness,
That bound my passion to you.

Emma. Ah, forgive.

I glory in your mettle, in the flash
Of bright desire that hurries from your eyes.
Canute, I have been mated with a creature
Who took my favours with a weary face,
Whose hands were soft, whose lips were treacherous.
It injures me to think of him ; he's naught.
In you I greet a man—whose sex stands up
Within him, ruling every element ;
'Tis captain of his body. When 'tis so,
And those who wed us bear the virile stamp,
What can we do but worship ?

Canute. Nay, my part
Is to revere. I ponder on your grace,
Your state in movement : why, your very smile
Tames like a lyre. Great lady, shall my love
Be sacrilegious ? I have seen them burn
The lovely missals in the libraries,
And a hot flush has come into my face ;
'Twas all that they could do with them, but there—
The pictures, and the story, the bright words
Of God—all wasted : let me be your scholar,
Instruct me, make me worshipful, be patient,
And you will fashion me a king so great
That you yourself shall tremble at my fame ;
For I will raise an empire and excel
In every princely art. I have ambition,
But there is something that I lack that sways
The conduct of the world. That hour we met
At London, how I loved to watch your face
Wrinkling in state-craft, and in policy

So subtle 'mid the blundering warriors !
I could not let the beauty simply stir
Desire, that may redeem the negligence
Of my untempered youth, raise me to honour,
Benignity, and wisdom.
Emma. But the toil !
One must not dim these glittering, blue eyes
With the thick-lettered pages. Woo me, woo !
Be amorous ; a woman best imparts
Her knowledge and her mysteries to one
Adoringly receptive. Ah—the Redeless
Had not been christened so, had he relied
On my illuming sense, my intellect,
My temper, and discretion. All are yours,
So you will be my lover.
Canute. Now I feel
Strength to found kingdoms.
Emma [*embracing him*]. For thou art a king.

SCENE IV. *A dimly-lighted room; in a smaller room, the child sleeping. Enter* EDITH.

Edith. They bound me to a traitor and a churl,
And yet my grandsire had eight under-kings
For vassals. He will weary of me soon,
And I at Romsey, or some royal house,
Shall dwell where there is diligence and peace.
How beautiful this loneliness ! It seems,
At balmy evening, like that holy time

Spent in the cloister, with this difference—
My son lies in my sight ; and I who ever
Have loved men's souls, and prayed for their redemption,—
But coldly, as God loved the world before
The Bethlehem Babe lay in His cradle,—now
Faint in my importunity to save.
For I have learnt how terrible the strength
Of evil, and how great infirmity
Besets soft, striving natures. When I kneel
And offer supplication for the child,
I feel him press and vibrate in the chords
O' my inmost being. Ghostly premonitions
Enhance my restless care and terror, portents
No stretch of happy days could quite expunge :
For I had vision of him, ere his birth,
Lifting a gory hand half-full of flowers ;
It seemed while he lay slumbering on my knee,
One came and whispered to him, and he laughed,
And did not know me any more. I shudder
When his remorseless father forces him
To lash his favourite hound, or blind the falcon
He cherished from the nest. A messenger
Says Edric comes to-night ; and I have known
The child turn cold, yea, stammer, and tell lies
If he but heard his footfall on the stairs.
There is one way to save him ; as he sleeps
Gently to part him from his enemies :
I have so often tried, but he will lie
With soft, wide lips, as when I suckled him,

And he fell dreaming from the breast. Alas!
He never has outgrown his infancy.
How I must pray!

[*Enter* EDRIC, *unperceived.*]

Edric. She looks a lady born,
And I am proud to own her; slender hands,
And hair down to the knees! Her eyes are fresh
With constant tears,—a dew that shall not dry,—
And the thin, curving lips are beautiful,
Though worn with ceaseless prayers. My pretty saint!
I love her, and must now, in jealousy,
Purge her of earthly passion. Will she yield
To the proposal I shall make to-night?
How long ago she would have lost her wits,
Save for the chapel and confessional!

[EDITH *perceives him, and starts back.*]

Edith, sit down by me. I ride at dawn,
And need some hours of rest. Watch by my couch,
And waken me at midnight, when I start
For Edmund's quarters; for your brother sends
A chamberlain to beg that he may borrow
Our Alfgar—a month's play and bed-fellow;
And the request is opportune. My king
Is sick of semi-governance. I know
An easy death to keep the murderer
Clean of suspicion;—a few, pregnant words
To our meek offspring, and, without offence,
Canute is well-established on his throne,
And heavily my debtor. You are mute;
My plan commends itself?

Edith. If it must be,
Why did you tell me of it?
Edric. To bespeak
Heaven's blessing on the scheme and execution.
Give me a kiss;—a face of ivory
To match yon crucifix. Now get within.
[*Motioning to the child's room. Exit* EDITH.]
Unearthly creature! She will win forgiveness
Of my vile sin before it is committed;
While Edmund lies at peace upon his bed,
She will have prayed me guiltless of his murder.
She was revolted when I married her
By my dull lewdness; in our wedded hours,
As I unfolded to her my atrocious
And unimagined culpability,
She grew the guardian angel of my spirit;
And now, asleep or waking, I am certain
Of pardon for my most appalling crimes,
And, trusting to her saintly vigilance,
Can close my eyes and fall asleep without
A *pater-noster*, [*Lies down—closes his eyes.*]
[*Re-enter* EDITH, *with a dagger.*]
Edith. I will not suborn
Any poor, guilty wretch to do the deed,
But ope for him myself the door of Hell,
And close it on the instant. And the child—
This is an easy deed, and, unforbidden,
I lift my arm to slay. His time is come!
[*She strikes his breast, and swoons. He rises in armour, unhurt.*]

Edric. A simple scratch, but sly and treacherous ;
She must not go unpunished. How to hurt ?
If I should leave her thus, she will wake dazed,
And stutter forth my deed. By heaven, such hate
Comes on me I could kill her.—What, revived !
You woke me roughly, and an hour too soon.
Now we can talk of my design.

Edith. Oh, if
Edmund must die—
As there may be state reasons, do it thus—
Let him not suffer. You had never known.
Take, take the sword.

Edric. Here is my instrument.

[*Turning to the child, who watches from his bed.*]

Awake ! Ha, ha, awake ! What, sirrah, staring ?
You have not slept. Get ready for a journey.
You watched, I know it by your face, the way
Your mother raised her arm to murder me.
Get up ; I want you to do that again
On uncle Edmund, when he lies asleep.
I'll teach you.

[*The child trembles, and dresses himself, his eyes fixed on his mother.* EDRIC *puts a dagger in his bosom.*]

Edith. There are voices—it begins.
God ! God ! the dagger gleams from out his vest,
And his white, witless eyes are fixed on me ;
There is no speech upon his lips, he wanders
As the fiend to and fro. Come to me, Alfgar ;
I cannot lift myself. My boy, be brave,
Put that away [*pointing to the dagger*], and though he torture you. . . .

O God! I cannot speak, it grows confused;
I feel the fetters on my brain struck off.
No matter, you can play about the same;
I feel so happy.

Edric. He shall promise me
Entire obedience. If he disobey,
He knows his punishment: I blind his eyes,
And leave him shut up in the dark for ever.

[*The child utters a wild scream.*]

Edith. Ah, ah! an idiot laugh. How pleasantly
He'll spend the days, and mutter in the grass.
'Tis sweet as death, this madness. Up and down
I' the sunshine, and to laugh the whole long day.

Child. I could not see to do it!

Edith. No; he's blind!
Give me the dagger. I am free at last—
Free, free. And now I'll tell you something strange;
I never shall remember any more.
Come, we are play-fellows, and you must hide
In the deep water. None will find you there,
Down in the moat, by the neglected well—
The sedges keep a-rocking. [*She seizes the child, and sways to and fro with him in her arms.*]
Though he's drowsy,
I cannot close his eyes; but never mind,
We are quite happy.

[EDRIC *snatches the child, and strikes* EDITH *down.*]

Child. Father, let us go:
I cannot bear the feel of her,—her arms
Are snaky—take me where it must be done;
I will not flinch

Edric [*setting the child before him*]. With this young innocent
To cloak my purpose, I will set aside
The royal line, and push up to the throne.
[*Glancing at* EDITH.] Will it not gall her? I foresaw this raving,
And brought a nun to take her to her cell
At Malmesbury; after my sore discipline,
The cordials of religion. [*To the child.*] Come along.
[*Exit, with the child.*]

[EDITH *rises, and looks carefully round the room.*]

Edith. An orphan! I shall find him hereabouts.
They said I must go searching in the tombs;
But there are madmen in the rocks, and one
Has struck me on the brow. A pretty boy,
And his poor mother crying. I am fearful
That she has lost her wits. I will be bold,
And face the peril.

Prioress. Lady, come with me.

Edith. No, no! that is the way to Paradise;
I will not be your dupe. If you can lead
To the black moat, by the neglected well,
Down in the rushes, I will whisper you
Where he is hidden. Softly step along. [*Exeunt.*]

ACT III.

SCENE I. *A room on the northern bank of the Thames, overlooking the Danish fleet.*

Enter CANUTE.

Canute. Sunset! The air is ominous. I muse
On Danish majesty, my splendid fleet,
England's great city-river, and my Ravens
Flapping across; yet by King Edmund's favour
I winter in the Thames.

[*Enter* THORORIN.]

O Thororin,
Be near me, play to me; I am beset
By terrible temptations.

Thororin. English priests
Should teach you their religion; or your lady,
Your Christian queen, can she not give instruction,
And settle you in conduct? We are friends,
Love binds us; she is satisfied to listen
Hour after hour to the triumphant verse
I sang when you were pagan. Look at her!

[EMMA *and* EDRIC *are seen landing.*]

She gives her hand to Streona. Confess
Your misery to that fine, goading face,
And it will cure despondency.

[THORORIN *withdraws as* EMMA *and* EDRIC *approach.*]

Canute. He hurts
Deep, deep,—for he has visions, and should know
That I was crying out in mortal pain
For divination, insight, such as poets

Should draw from open gazing on the world.
What means my queen? Although her lips are rigid,
A stormy secret plays about her brows,
And, passing Edric's hand, she speeds to me,
Urgent, despotic.

Emma. King of England, hail!
My all-possessing, worshipful, young lord.
Ah, ah, a regal flush! Wilt thou to London?
It is an air I love. Come, a behaviour
Less frank in its disclosures; feign surprise!

Canute. What means this greeting? Edmund is not dead?

Emma. All, all his lands are joined this day to yours;
I give you half a kingdom, for you took me
Without a dowry.

Canute. Did he die by nature?
His cheek was withered when I saw him last;
Six battles had he fought, and swept like fire
Now here, now there, calling slow country-folk
To gather to his wars. A noble ruler!
[*To* EDRIC.] He died at peace,—with housel?

Edric. What a question!
When I sit down to feast, I know a sheep
Has bled for my repast.

Canute [*seizing* EDRIC]. What, you have slain
Your very lord, who pardoned you your vileness,
Who trusted you?

Edric. Ay, ay, he was a fool;
He trusted everybody, even *you;*

He treated you like one of the old stock,
Who knew the strength of covenant.
[CANUTE *relaxes his hold.*] We settled
At Olney I should do this bit of work ;
And now perform your part ; the Mercian earldom,
And that respect you pay a man who serves
At some great crisis !

Canute. Caitiff, did I give you
A word or a command that day I swore ?

Edric. The solemn oaths were all for Edmund's ears ;
With me connivance was enough. Come, come,
No temper ! There is sunset on the towers
Of London ; all those gilded battlements
Are yours, and no suspicion : in a fit
Of lunacy my lad, while bedfellow
To his good uncle, stabbed him as he slept.
The childish actor had been ably prompted,
And terror made him perfect at the art ;
His guilt is palpable. He roams the fields,
A jabbering little devil, full of secrets
To make Beelzebub an eaves-dropper.
[*Aside.*] I waste my breath ; a change is on his features.
I know this quiet ; it arrests the sense,
Like the appeasing movement of a storm,
That paralyses, ere it devastate.
Best let her feel its fury. [*Turns to* EMMA, *who remains breathlessly staring at* CANUTE.] 'Tis a sickness
Needs the domestic touch ; I take my leave.
When it is opportune recall my service,
Urge my desert.

Canute. I fear to deal the blow,
And make a lightning end. I would call forth
My feasting jarls—they would bespatter him
With such disgraces, ridicule, and flaunts,
That he would die, unstruck, of countless gibes,
And feel by prophecy his corpse would serve
For next day's merriment. [*Seizing* EDRIC *suddenly.*]
Thou hast offended
Beyond the bounds of nature, and the darkness
Shall never cover thee; for thee no grave,
But infinite exposure in the sun;
Corruption blazon thee the thing thou art,
Abhorred and dissolute!
[CANUTE *strangles* EDRIC, *flings his body into the stream, and gazes out.*]

Emma. To look at it
The male's fierce nature in its nakedness,
With passions that dumb creatures in their lairs
Conceive in solitude! How break it in?
Wild as the waters that engulfed the world,
It rages in its hour of dominance,
And all familiar outlines are destroyed;
There is no sky, no comfort, no relief,
No streak in the great wilderness. O God,
Thou gavest us our beauty and our guile
To win these creatures. I will try a touch,—
'Tis softer than the voice, more powerful.

Canute. I teem with memory. Old Gorm would glare
Above his cup—— Whose hand is this?

Emma. My king,

You are a murderer.

Canute. I slew him not,
The great lord Edmund ; if indeed I slew,
I loved his kingdom, loved his people, all
The other side, the hills beyond the stream ;
I loved him, yea, I hugged him to my heart,
I felt him royal.

Emma. O Canute, you murdered
The faithful Edric.

Canute. God ! what I have done
Is bloody round my brain ; I cannot see.
I'm dazed to find my wife, and this close room
Behind me, when I leave the boundless wind,
And my far childhood.

Emma. Spend your senseless wrath
On me, your Emma, who exalted you
To your most dear ambition. Yet you slew
The faithful servant who fulfilled the deed.

Canute. Did you not lay a hand on me and weep ?

Emma. He loved you truly—as your queen doth love,
And therefore I must weep him. Did you fear
Alfred, my eldest born of Ethelred,
I would myself with my own hands destroy
His sight, his life, whatever you should crave ;
For all that derogates from your estate
Is fitted for destruction.

Canute [*unheeding*]. Is it thus
That Hell begins ? and can God make damnation
With just a little shifting of the days ?
When me the live hour brings its transient tale,

I look it in the face: but shall the past
Ride down and meet me on the open plain?
Can nothing grow obscure,—the mighty figure,
Erect and kindly,—the reproachful glance
On skulking Edric? Am I forced to feel
Again the pressure of the great, warm hands,
And mutter words of feigning amity?
Nay, crowd the English people on the bank,
Unveil the hypocrite, call me by names
Shall strip me bare of majesty—a coward,
A cunning, sleek barbarian. Supreme
Above me thou shalt sit a king and judge—
Ah, I bethink me there are tears and prayers,
And drops of blood fall from the crucifix,
Or the great agony would overcome,
And I should fail of penitence; it works
Like death within me.

Emma. Desolate, abandoned!
Oh, I must rally him.—My dearest lord,
Do not grow pale as one in guiltiness.
Never till now have I beheld you blench.
The deed was my conception; you are free.
I could not suffer you a demi-king,
Nor make you present of a demi-heir;
Therefore I ordered Edmund should be slain;
I gave command upon our marriage day,
And Edric nodded.

Canute [*unheeding*]. I have seen a fox
Steal round a yard to snatch; a prowling dog
Creep for a bone. Ah, Edric, you and I

Are mates, the fiends will couple us in hell,
To hunt down the unwary. I repent
I plunged you in the cold;—my flaming cheek
Must bear the shame, while cool oblivion
Washes you o'er and o'er.

Emma. He sickens me
With his dull raving.—My exceeding love
Moved me to hint to Edric . . .

Canute [*leaping to the window*]. Has he sunk?
The moon has spread a sheet upon the stream,
And hidden all that's fatal. Treachery—
Ay, here, and my own act.

Emma. He is intent
On self-reproach and bitterness.

Canute. The stars
Have steadfast faces, and prefix our doom;
It is the wandering comets lead astray
With unsteered courses. What is permanent
Is god-like, and the shifty things a flaw
And a discredit to the universe.
Heaven hath so honoured man that he can bring
His word to pass, and make a feeble promise,
A breath, and an endeavour, more assured
Than rise or set of sun. That majesty
Being disowned, there is no use in kings,
No purpose to accomplish. [*Turning to* EMMA.]
Edmund's sons
Shall have their portion; I can make amends.
But that's not large enough! I would be rid
Of degradation, of the filching nature,
The vileness in the blood.

Emma [*aside*]. God pardon me!
Until I hear that Edmund's babes are slain,
I have no strength for travail.——Oh, I faint.
'Twas thoughtless 'fore a woman in my state
To hack and murder. You are terrible;
Your wrath, I fear, has cost your land an heir.
For him, for you, I sinned. Canute, I die;
Pardon and pray for me.
Canute. She's deadly white.
O Lady, have I hurt you?
Emma. Ay, to death.
A mailed voice!—I am used to minstrel's tones;
And the reproach cut. I shall surely die
Barren and cursed, but on my failing knees
I pray you nurse these children as your own,
Adopt them both, and for your unborn babe
Harbour no guilty thought.
Canute. You madden me.
Emma, you cannot mean——
Emma. Nay, give my child
A third of your possessions, be untrue
To your great, bridal oath. What is a woman,
A mother, that your word to her should bind,
Though sealed with bridegroom's kisses. At my knees
You swore such things—a promise that the fruit
Of our embrace should own as heritage
All English royalties. Be false, dear king,
Add broken vows to deeds of faithlessness,
And take advantage of my sex; all men
Write truth to wives and maidens on a tablet

Of running water. They are Edmund's sons;
And you repent.

Canute. My lot is tied to yours,
Fell tigress, temptress. Would you have your den
Bloody with slaughtered babes?

Emma. I cannot bear
The sight of blood, the talk of butchery.
These children, let me never hear their names;
But bring me word they are not in the land.
We have removed the trouble of two kings;
No rival princes should encumber us;
For if you hold to the legitimate
And lawful issue, there are royal lads,
The two I pushed back from the throne to set
My young usurper there. I'd rather see
The boys I bore, than these step-grandchildren,
Mounting my daïs-steps. I must entreat
You keep good faith with me.

Canute. You hold me bound
To that wild oath?

Emma. Your lips were hot and ready;
Your hands embraced my fingers. Ah, but then
I had not stooped from my great widowhood.
I was so amorous, I forgot my lover
Was not of gentle mould; like kingly Edmund,
I trusted the barbarian. Ay, strike me!
Your viking humour is not void of charm.
King Ethelred was sorry oftentimes,
Exceeding sorry, he had bribed the Danes;
A while ago you brought him to my mind;
Do not be sorry. . .

Canute. Have you no remorse?
Emma. That you are England's king? Impossible!
Go, and prevent mischance. Remove these babes,
All will be well.
Canute. They never shall be slain,
But harboured safely where I cannot lay
My cruel hands about them. Over-sea,
Olaf, my brother, shall be foster nurse;
You shall not look on them [*starting up*]. I will give orders
They presently set sail.
Emma [*intercepting him*]. King Edmund's widow
May trust your tenderness; I bow a victim
To your most killing hate. How opportune
The river flows beneath! I cannot live,
Yet, queenly, choose the manner of my death.
Lift me, my lord, once more into your arms,
Then fling me from you. [*He pushes her away, and she falls.*]
Canute. God! no more temptation!
Let me not touch you, for my pulses dance
With murderous fever. All my promises
I will perform, and then I shall breathe free
To pour on you the measure of my hate,
To punish, to divorce you. [*Exit.*]
Emma. Gone! His wrath
Has left me smitten—such huge, manly rage;
I'm shaken to the heart. So it should be.
One cannot love a man whose hands show not
As clearly they were made to deal stout blows,

As his smooth lips for kisses' tender use.
But yet my child,—he should not peril him,—
And, oh, the hatred in his quivering breath
As he forsook me. I have suffered treatment
Worthy of lamentation, and a sea
Heaves at my bosom ; but I loose no weeping.
Without him all is tearless, desperate ;
I have a headlong wish to die. Alas !
We cannot look each other in the face,
When there is jar between us ; so accursed
Are quarrels of true love. I do not doubt
But my inextricable charm will keep
This boy in adoration. I will rest me
Upon our marriage-bed, on the dear couch,
Till I have strength, and beauty soothed enough
Simply to rise and draw him to my feet. [*Exit.*]

Scene II. *The same ; later.*

Enter Canute.

Canute. She dared not wait my coming, and shall look
No more upon my face.—A vacancy,
A blank ! that scarf left trailing on the floor,
A shred too of her robe,—I must have trampled,
Have hurt her, as I thrust her off. A shred,
A tag, and is it thus that women suffer ?
We can inflict so little on such natures ;
We cannot make reprisals. Slavish tears
For Edric, and,—O Hel !—a bloody gleam

Across her eyes, when I proclaimed the rights
Of Edmund's children. I am cut adrift,
Far, far from the great, civilizing God,—
Dull, speechless, unappraised.
[*A voice singing.*] Is that a child
At babble with his vespers?—Silver sweet!
It minds me of the holy brotherhood,
Chanting adown the banks. As yesterday
I see all clear, how as they moved they chanted,
And made a mute procession in the stream.
[*Gazing abstractedly on the water.*]

> Merrily sang the monks of Ely,
> As Canute the king passed by.
> Row to the shore, knights, said the king,
> And let us hear these Churchmen sing.

Still are they singing? It was Candlemas,
My queen sat splendid at the prow and listened
With heaving breast. 'Twas then the passion seized me
To emulate, to let her know my ear
Had common pleasure with her, and I trilled
The story out. The look she turned on me!
The choir shall sing this music. I resolved
In the glory of the verse to civilize
My blood, to sweeten it, to give it law,
To curb my wild thoughts with the rein of metre.
Row to the shore! So pleasantly it ran,
A ripple on the wave. I grew ambitious
To be a scholar like King Alfred, gather
Wise men about me, in myself possess
A treasure, an enchantment. For an instant

I looked round royally, and felt a king.
The abbey-chant, the stream, the meadow-land,
The willows glimmering in the sun ;—a poet
Wins things to come so close. A plash, a gurgle !
There's a black memory for the river now ;
And hark ! strange, solemn, Latin words that toll,
And move on slowly to me. . . . Up the stair.—
Without the door. A wail, a litany !

[*Enter Child singing.*]

Child. Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam ;
Et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum, dele iniquitatem meam.

Canute. How perfectly he sings the music ! Child,
Who art thou with that voice, those dying cheeks ?
Art thou an angel sent to wring my heart,
Or is it mortal woe ? Thine arms are full.

Child. Green, country herbs, they say, will staunch a wound ;
And I have run about the fields and gathered
Those I could catch up quickly :—for the blood
Was leaping all the while. But here is clary,
The blessèd thistle, yarrow, sicklewort,
And all-heal red as gore. I knew a wood
So dark and cool, I crept for lily-leaves ;
Then it grew lonely, and I lost the way.
But, oh, you must not beat me ; it is done.
Father, I stabbed him, throw away the whip !
Now God will scourge me. So I plucked the flowers,
And sang for mercy in the holy words
Priest Sampson taught me, *Miserere !*

Canute. This
Is Edric's child, the little murderer,
Who did my deed of treason. Edmund, turn
Those trustful eyes from off me.
Child. Take me back.
He will be dead . . . He fell, O father, fell,
And when I put my cheek against his side,
Gave a great pant. Let's pray for him together.
Can you sing *Miserere?* For I did it,
And then he looked . . . Once in the ivy-tod
I caught an owl, and hurt its wing. 'Twas so
He looked. Oh, quickly tell me where he lies—
Next room? or down the passage? Do you know
He was my uncle, and was kissing me,
One, two, three, on my head.
Canute. Cease! From these lips,
White, childish penitents, how awful sounds
The wild avowal of their treachery,
Child, it was I who struck your uncle's side,
Who falsely kissed him; it was I who set
Your father on this wickedness; 'twas I
Who drove your frantic innocence to work
The sin of my conception. Can you learn
That I alone am guilty, and God's wrath
Will visit me with judgment?
Child. Come along,
And take me where he is. How can I go?
I do not know the path or time of day.
The leaves are fading. Can the blood flow long
Before it kills? I saw it spirt and jump;

I could not see it now. I ran and ran . . .
Perchance I stayed too long about the fields.
'Tis dark; no trees and hedges. He is gone,
And I am damned for ever; the fresh herbs
Could once have saved me.

Canute. He is chill and fainting;
Give me these hands.

Child. I am not much afraid.
Before I struck at him my skin was hot;
Now dew is falling on me; it is cool.
Let me lie in your arms where I can look
Up at the sky. There's some one . . . and he grows
So kindly. Oh, he smiles down all the way,
Quite golden in my eyes.

Canute. He sees the moon.
How pale and cold he's growing! All the flowers
Are slipping down. I cannot bear his weight.
'Tis condemnation. There is just a spot
Here on his garment, one bright drop of blood,
Sprinkling his spirit; he is saved; on him
It is the very mark of Christ; on me
The blot that makes illegible my name
I' the book of life.

Child. If I should fall asleep,
It will not matter, for I could not see
The healing plants by night; besides my eyes
Will open wide at morning. I must hold
The blessèd thistle in my hand, and pray;
And God may so forgive me. *Miserere!*

Canute. The child is dying on my breast. He closes

His frightened eyes; the notes are on his lips,
His arm still round my shoulder.

*. * * * * *

Sharply flows
The Thames now he is dead; the rush, the hum,
Are like a conscience haunting me without.
I cannot bear it. I will fling him forth
To the engulfing river, and forget him.
Rank, pagan impulse! I would learn the prayer,
Recall the gracious song,—and stormy sagas
Come hurtling through my brain. I am a stranger
To our sweet Saviour Christ; I cannot pray;
I love the slaughter of my enemies,
And to exact full vengeance. Little one,
Thou shalt have fair, white sere-cloth, and a circlet
Of purest gold. Now that I look on thee,
It grows soft in my heart as when they chanted
Across the stream.—*Canute the king passed by,*
And listened.—They shall sing about thy grave.
[*He bows himself over the child and weeps.*]

SCENE III. *Malmesbury. The Orchard—moonlight.*
EDITH *by a pool.*

Edith. They must not dress me like a penitent . . .
It was for kindness. White, white up in heaven,
And glist'ring: how it sails about the sky;
And I am for the water. I will do 't—
They put it on me as a dreadful task
To pull him out. Oh, here are golden flowers;

I will step softly in . . . but at the roots
It's black and treacherous—foul iris-bed.
Back, back! I cannot bear the filth. O Edric,
I will have courage, yea, I will be damned,
Damned for your sake. When it grows dark again,
I'll fling down in the water. For a little . . .
Oh, I will come to you, I know my service—
But just to watch the silver in the clouds,
Where there is muffled music. *Gloria!*
It's full through all the heavens, and the child
Sings clearer than the rest. How beautiful
To watch him from so very far away.
I loiter. I came down to the deep pool
To get damnation; they shall never say
That I deserted him, who am his wife.
How he has drawn me to him from the hour
He humbled me. I think he grows more strong
Now he is with the devils, and will bring
A host of them to carry me away.
No, no! 'Tis I myself must enter it;
For *'tis obedience that shall break her in*,
He said, *I will not force her.* Now 'tis dark,
And I shall stumble on the choking rushes,
If I should try to drown. Who walks the orchard,
Weeping so bitterly?

Elgiva. O England, England,
Dost feel it at thy heart, thou hast no king?
Ah me, and no avenger? The twin boys
I bore, that should have rid thee of thy tyrant,
Rock on the chilly sea: such little ones,

Cast forth without a nurse. O pitiless!
We do not keep a fire where no one comes;
I'm lonely, and the ashes in my blood
Tell of such desolation. I have lost
My twain, and all my kindness—
Edith. Lady, lady,
'Tis quiet; you can rock a child to sleep
Down there, if that's your meaning. Come along.
Elgiva. It is his sister Edith, who has had
Strange woe; whose little son . . . O God! O Heaven!
She stands there from whose body came the thing
That widowed me. So tall she is and white—
The fountain of my tears.
Edith. I want your hand
To do it with. I held an iris-leaf—
It flashed like a drowned sword, and then I cried
A ghost! The moonlight laughed so merrily.
But I will say the Scripture over: *Wives,*
Obey your husbands. He is hidden there,
Under the cresses.
Elgiva [*aside*]. She is surely mad.
I'll be an angry keeper, and my mood
Gives me a touch of cruelty.—Stand still.
How dare you stir?
Edith. It is all learnt by heart;
It must be done; he watches all the while,
Though out of sight.
Elgiva. Come back to me. Obey!
Edith. Ah, now you know the word—obey! Yes, yes.

I will do all you tell me.

Elgiva. Then walk back.

[*Aside*] O God, that I should be so harsh! She fixes
Such waiting eyes upon me, timorous,
Yet full of noble candour, Edmund's eyes,
That could not learn suspicion.—Come away;
Sit on the bank. She does it like a child.
A child! I fill with tenderness: God sends her
To keep my heart a mother's. How it throbs
Against her nestling forehead!

Edith. I am happy;
You said I must not drown. Indeed 'twas foul,
And I am fond of linen newly washed
I mean in shallow water, where the pebbles
Are clear and burnished . . . for—you do not know—
I felt that I was making me a harlot
To perish with him. Say it over to me,
Forbid it every hour and every day,
Now, and each moment! Save me by your voice,
Lest the reeds have me, and the loathsomeness,
The violating dregs.

Elgiva. You shall not die;
It is a great command; and mortal sin
It were to disobey.

Edith. Is that the word?
I feel an impulse sucking me apart
From this dear side, and yonder—

Elgiva. I am strong;
You shall not go. Obey me.

Edith. There it is!

Your voice is living, his down there is dead ;
He could but catch me with the water plants ;
You hold me in your lap, and twine me round
So firmly in your arms. *Obey, obey !*
Just as you think it well for me. I know
Why they have dressed me as a penitent ;
My feet are muddy ; but my hair, you see,
Is golden when I turn it to the moon,
Quite clear and shining. Shall I tie it up
The old way, like a crown ? Faugh, it is damp ;
I thought I had not sinned.

Elgiva. It is the dew
Of autumn-eve, my dearest. You shall be
My care, my child, my blessing. We will live
Thus hand-in-hand, for we are sisters, both
Beloved of Edmund. It was in this orchard
His first kiss crowned my lips below the trees ;
Their buds were red : the apples now are fallen,
The boughs no more possess them. Do I cry ?
But there is something calm as Paradise
I' the climate of this weeping. All the night
Is one blue home of stars, and I am certain
Of a sweet sudden that my boys are safe
In the far country, and will live at peace,
And grow up with their father's spirit near.
I think it is this crooning at my breast
Makes me so blessèd ; like the wood-dove's moan,
Sorrow and comfort are both reconciled
In this low music. She is sleeping half,
And half complaining. Noble Edmund's sister,

And England's royal princess!

Edith. I have never
Known all this joy since I was three years old.
I go back in your arms through many days
Till I can find that I lay warm like this,
Taking no thought, my blood just like a prayer
They chant to measured harmonies.

Elgiva. She enters
The life of heaven, though outside its door,
And a mad nun at Malmesbury! I will lead her
To my own cell; for the bland night is sending
Its sleep to earth, and visiting her brain
To heal all ache. My woman-child, my own. [*Exeunt.*]

SCENE IV. *Glastonbury.*

Early morning. The burial-ground; beyond, the church, open, disclosing EDMUND'S *tomb, by which* CANUTE *stands.*

Enter Archbishop ETHELNOTH *and a Monk.*

Monk. Doth the king still keep vigil?

Ethelnoth. I have watched unseen through the whole night. Sometimes he would be restlessly pacing; and anon, he would hide his face—dash his rosary to earth. But his great, fierce hands showed the wrestling. In the third watch a change came; his prayers were all said; he turned from the tomb, and looked up. Then he fell a musing, long, long. It was just when the day trem-

bled, and he watched all the changes in the sky, like a child. After that he never moved till the bell sounded for matins.

Monk. Monuments all about him, and he had no fear of the dead?

Ethelnoth. Not the least: he looked often at the graves, with a kingly eye too.

Monk. You think he is penitent?

Ethelnoth. I would fain have questioned him: his face was so full of responses. But there was a privacy about it, kept me well in the shadow.

Monk. This is curious. If he should have a great vision to recount! Did his brows shine?

Ethelnoth. Well, to be honest, there is nothing in Scripture comparable with his aspect. The bright colour is come back to his cheeks; and his eyes burn again like stars. He looked sickly so long.

Monk. Yes; and it is marvellous a night in the chapel should recover him. I could never live through it. There is so much that is supernatural. But he does not know how the corpses bloom about him—fresh as resurrection-morn; he has never seen a saint's coffin opened, nor breathed the fragrant, spiced air from the lips. He is back now at his prayers.

Ethelnoth. And the sunlight of the dawn is over him. His head glows like an altar seized by God's descent. I must see now that he rests and has meat. He will suddenly hunger, and then no patience. It is the swoop of the falcon on the woodcock. Get within.

[*Exit Monk.*]

[*To Canute.*] I trust you have found peace and absolution?

Canute. 'Tis for King Edmund that I kept the watch:
I said the prayers, the great mulct for his soul;
My task was ended long since in the dark.

Ethelnoth. It should have kept you lowly on your knees
Till dawn. A penance—have you learnt them all,
The varied, slow, humiliating rites?

Canute. 'Tis little that I know except the creed,
And *Pater-noster* that Christ sang Himself,
And taught to His disciples: seven prayers
There are in that Divine one, and he sends
To God a message touching every want
A man may have, who sings it in his heart,
As I above this tomb. Oh, I have deeply
Foredone myself; but mercy hath been shown me,
And I for ever shall hold fast in thought
All this night's miracle.

Ethelnoth. Confide the vision.
You have an aspect most mysterious,
As God had forced an entrance to your soul.

Canute. O Ethelnoth, I have given up the keys of the city to Him. There is no warfare longer between us. They are wonderful Hands to fall into, and a wide world that is opening. I must be a pilgrim.

Ethelnoth. Then you saw one call you to St. Peter's dome; or St. Joseph, who himself took the young Child to a new country, with his wanderer's staff pointed your route?

Canute. No; 'tis the need of travel,
That I may think. God is a law-giver,
And in the mysteries of nature prints
The characters of rule. All things with Him
Are from a source, and of necessity
As stern as that which makes corruption sequence
To the slacked bonds of life.

Ethelnoth. How shall you journey?

Canute. Not by the sea—that's pagan; by slow highways,
Pausing at cities.

Ethelnoth. This is worldly business,
Of which your soul will get no benefit.

Canute [*pointing to the altar*]. Are your eyes glutted with the treasure there?
My breach of faith has opened intercourse
'Twixt me and heaven: we do not haggle now
On the first point at issue. Oh, this large,
Wide world of sorrow—'tis as I had entered
A kingdom. Let us out into the light.
[*Turning to the burial-ground.*]
Such very early morning, autumn-time,
A rigour in the air; from the dark chapel
How sharp the contrast!—golden sycamores,
The dew a filmy veil across the grass,
The blue mist o' the orchard. 'Tis the moment
When nature puts on immortality,
Casting her mortal weeds, and this elation
Springs from itself, a current in the air
That hath no ripple.

[*Re-enter Monk: a procession passes.*]

From the Fount of God
I have drunk and am refreshed. My Edmund's England
Shall be no fleeting kingdom. Ethelnoth—[*Exeunt into the Church, conversing, and finally joining the procession.*]

Monk. Why, he looks like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber. I will at once set this down. How he towers above the band of brethren! Heaven's favour is assuredly upon him—and so beautiful! He has the roses and lilies of a woman—not like brother Thurstan, with the great, red patches in his cheeks. But it's in the Scriptures—holiness always gets into the skin. My complexion is a poor witness to my sanctity. [*Exit into the Church.*]

[*Enter* EMMA *into the burial-ground.*]

Emma. Love, love!—I'll learn it in the burial-ground;
Love, love!—they think that I come here to pray?
Ay, as monks pace this path in orisons
To be beloved—of God. What dost thou here,

[*Enter* THORORIN.]

My Thororin, in this drear water-land,
This isle of apple-orchards? Thou stand'st mute.
I left thy noble Viking at the tomb
Of Edmund, weeping; some vicissitude
Has fallen on him; he is shrunk and shamed.

Thororin. And changed to thee, my queen?

Emma. Oh, Heaven severs
More hearts than it unites. Thou art a poet,
And hath he banished thee his company?

Thororin. We two have stood together when the stars
Shone straight down in the sea, and I have sped
The ship with music fleeter than the wind.
I will to sea; there I shall dream of him,
Ah, there I shall recover—

Emma. Thororin,
Thou hast my queenly heart. I can disburthen
Only to thee—a priest is judge of sin:
Who cares for sin? Who would be healed of that?
The hunger and the thirst about the heart
The poet can assuage; he knows the truth—
That love is the religion, and the body
But a poor pagan till it learn its rites.
We were so happy: none should look on lovers;
I' the world 'tis outrage, and on Heaven's part
It spoils the privacy. Two souls alone
With the blind sky and unrecording earth
To witness them—then there may be disclosures,
Deep, amorous friendship; but with God to watch—
He's made all ill betwixt us.

Thororin. I have lost
The poet's joy, for in my Danish lord
All Sagas were accomplished. He betrays
Imagination, and the trust of song;
He has befooled my dreams, and I will go.
With me flies Gunhild; when she heard the king
Was praying, with an altered countenance,
She tossed her arms and cried, *He is undone,*
No hope for Scandinavia, but his child—

And a beam crossed her forehead.

Emma. She would bless
My babe if she beheld him ; he is featured
Like Gorm, his father's lawless grandfather
And stares out at the sea.

Thororin. Yea, she spake true ;—
Our king is lost ; last night I saw him shudder
Passing my harp, and my resolve is taken.
He shall not look upon the sacred creature,
That never speaks save to proclaim its love.
Withdraw your heart as I the instrument
That has no music for him.

Emma. Oh, to cease
From loving is impossible. He's changed,
I recognise it, but the man in him
Endures ; the tough love overlives these things ;
I could not quite forsake him. I will labour
To found fair abbeys, and enrich the Church,
Then, 'tis my last ambition, he will build
A stately tomb for me—a marriage bed ;
For I shall lie and listen to his voice,
Awake and trembling : he will talk of sin,
And pray, and stumble in the Latin words,
Till I shall laugh to hear him, but his thought
Will be of a gold-haired and royal saint,
Serene at God's right hand, and meet for worship.
'Twill please me, as I moulder at his knee,
To know he has that picture, and that Emma
Draws him o' nights to the moonlighted choir.
You sing love overlives death : sing it loud

In Norway! I will act it; I will feign.

Thororin. Nay, be yourself, show you despise this doting,
Show how ignoble is a reign of peace.
This sleepy air is not for warriors;
Rouse him to conquest; let him see your scorn.

Emma. And alienate him so. Have you not learnt,
My poet, love is the great, feigning art;
Itself the desperate, deep reality
That puts on all disguises? Feign to love,
All living creatures crowd to jeer at you,
Dead in dissimulation: be a lover,
And all that your beloved covets most
You will become. Did my lord set his heart
On gem, or missal, I would gratify
His whim, and now saints are his admiration—

Thororin. O noble-featured queen, you cannot grow
One of these petty women, with blank faces;
Your brow gleams as the flashing, northern sky,
And you will cease to charm him when you wear
A stagnant, dull sobriety.

[*Re-enter* CANUTE, ETHELNOTH, *and procession from the church. King and Archbishop walk apart.*]

Emma. He comes;
Is he not beautiful, a very hero?
To Norway! Spread his glory in the North!
When the great battle-lust possesses him
He will be perfect pagan. Oh, I love thee,
For thou hast sung of that in all the world

Most worthy of eternal chronicle,
And endless iteration.

Thororin. Come away!
Let us not look on him. The bells and chanting
Have thrust the homely sagas from his mind.

Emma. O harp, that keeps him famous through the world,
O Thororin, my poet, on thy brows
I set my lips. Couple my name with his;
Sing of our kingly bairn.—Forget the rest—
Sing of his glory, sing the conqueror.

Thororin [*scowling at* CANUTE]. A tattling penitent! Oh, I will tell
Great lies to make men tremble at thy name,
And thou shalt burn and harry like the rest,
The son of Swend, but fiercer in destruction.
I will keep faith with thee; my harp shall never
Know thy dishonour.

Emma. Seven battlefields
Thou hast to sing, and Edmund's overthrow.
Farewell! [*Exit* THORORIN; *she watches* CANUTE.] He doth not even look on me,
There is a seeking passion in his face,
He's thinking how he best can serve his God.
Some faces never alter.

[ETHELNOTH *advances to her.*]

Ethelnoth. Noble lady,
What do you in the early morning air?

Emma [*aside*]. He thinks I am so wrinkled and so stricken

That I disfigure the young day? My beauty
Shall dazzle and humiliate the monk,
And then—[*glances at* CANUTE]
'Tis said you lived here as a boy.
Archbishop, you have often paced this path
Among the abbey dead,—I came here humbly
To look for sepulture; my waning years
Incline me earthward, as those stooping trees
Bend their decaying branches to the ground.

Ethelnoth. Daughter, these precincts are not yet for you;
There's summer on your features, and your hair
Is radiant as Queen Guinevere's, whose bones
Moulder beneath you.

Emma [*shuddering*]. Have I found the grave
Of Guinevere?

Ethelnoth. Yes, lady, it was opened
Six years ago—the bloom still on her face,
But dusty.

Emma [*kneeling*]. Will you let me lie beside
This lovely queen? Oh, deeper in the earth!
[*Flings herself on the ground.*]
I am an ageing woman:—meet I die,
And give him my wild soul to wanton with.
[CANUTE *passes near her.*]
God, he is cruel, with sharp instruments
He's cutting at my heart. Ah, blessèd father,
Did we twain walk together, we would found
Such stately houses, for I love the Church;
Yet oh!—it is my mortal sin—my husband
Is foremost in my heart.

Ethelnoth. This reverie
Hath been too much prolonged, he doth not notice
His noble queen; she is a royal creature,
Doubtless of great munificence. I'll bring
This pair together.

Emma. All my revenues,
If you can make him penitent of this,
His infamous neglect.

[ETHELNOTH *walks apart with* CANUTE.]

In very truth,
My heart will burst its banks from this contraction
And pressure of my rage. I do not feign;
The fury in me doth transgress the limits
Of life's determined channels. [*Exit* ETHELNOTH.]

Canute [*approaching*]. Desolate!
My lady, with her bright hair in the grass
Untressed. Ah! you mistake; it was not here
They laid the king we murdered.

Emma. Here is buried
Our Arthur, faultless monarch of the West,
And Guinevere, his beauteous, wicked queen.
Oh, give me leave my lord, to lie with her.

Canute. You say that she was wicked.

Emma. So am I.
She had a heart too passionate, and beauty
That bore no bloom save in the clime of love.
We shall speak low together; she will prate
Of Lancelot, but I shall say my *husband*
Was my sole lover, and became a pilgrim:
I lay a shrouded figure on the bed,

When he returned.

Canute. Emma, my precious queen,
You make me stark with horror : for my soul
I go to Rome ; for I have wrought a deed
So black, so diabolical, I shudder
For hell by day and night. The time will come
When it will be far better for us, far,
Than all on middle earth, that we had ever
Performed God's will, and very earnestly
Loved Him with inward heart.

Emma. You grow religious,
The ties of earth unloose. Make no farewell,
Do not come near me living ; but this favour
I ask of you, when you return from Rome,
Visit my grave. You will have learnt how lowly
The courtesy to death.

Canute. O Emma, Emma,
My greatest, dearest, it was in your heart
To put away my rival.

Emma. You can pray,
It is the chief use of your lips. I'll die !
[*Stooping over* GUINEVERE'S *grave.*]
I would be buried with my kind ; your place
Will be by flawless Arthur.

Canute. Do you jeer ?
Then I will fling you off from bed and board.

Emma. Clip my long hair, and dress me as a nun ?
I prithee give me into custody
O' the archbishop. To the barrèd cell !
For he is gentle ; he will bring my boy

To play bo-peep at kissing.

Canute. You will make him
A murderer, a traitor.

Emma. Like his father!

Canute. Since penitents are dumb beneath the scourge,
I do not chide you. [*Aside.*] There is strength in me
To judge her, and condemn. A fatal creature!
Can you repent?

Emma. Of noble Edmund's death?
Most bitterly—for England has no king,
[CANUTE *turns away.*]
And he had royal gifts. Oh, I am mad
Thus from the grass to hiss at him. He goes;
Then all is disannulled between our lives,—
I am a lonely corpse. Help, help! Come back!

Canute. What would the queen with an unkingly man,
Whose crown she shares?

Emma. A lie, a hateful lie.
The wet mould at my breast is chill, and bitter
The memories that come up through the turf
Of that lost woman.

Canute. Emma, do you find
Your mate in her?

Emma. Yea, since she sinned for love.
There is no wickedness I would not work,
No crimes so monstrous that it would not seem
Part of my wifely duty, no deception
I would not practise for your dear advance.

I pray you mark, my king, that I confess
My guilt. [*Aside.*] I am not feigning, so my nature
Yearns for his deeper love.—My noble Dane,
[*Re-enter* ETHELNOTH *fearfully.*]
Your glory I have dimmed; as I deserve,
Put me away from you.
Ethelnoth [*distractedly*]. This must not be,
What God has joined——
Canute. Sever you not, you fool,
With priestly intervention. She is mine!
[*Raising and clasping* EMMA. *Exit* ETHELNOTH.]
Mine, mine,—the dearer for her wickedness,
The more to be desired! Be not afraid,
I have learnt this, sin is a mighty bond
'Twixt God and man. Love that hath ne'er forgiven
Is virgin and untender; spousal passion
Becomes acquainted with life's vilest things,
Transmutes them, and exalts. Oh, wonderful,
This touch of pardon,—all the shame cast out;
The heart a-ripple with the gaiety,
The leaping consciousness that Heaven knows all,
And yet esteems us royal. Think of it—
The joy, the hope!
Emma. The joy! To see your face
Turned to my brow, that's joy; and if your soul
Could even thus incline to my poor spirit,
All would be firm between us. I am old,
And fixed in disposition, hard to move,
Not changed in one rare day. Oh, you are young;
Have patience, give me slowly of your hopes,

Your happiness. I thought I had no king,—
All royalty was gone. But you are great
Beyond our nuptial night, beyond the day
That saw us crowned together.

Canute. Starry tears,
Such as the northern seas dashed in the face
Of your young Viking.

Emma. O Canute, these words
Give me a home again upon your breast.
Not wholly changed!

Canute. For thou art mine. Thus linked,
We will serve England; law and peacefulness
Shall, of our effort, dwell within her shores.
My brother could no more.

Emma. This altar-cloth
Hid in my robe—I had it in my thought
To lay it secretly on Edmund's shrine.
Will you present it?

Canute. O my Elfgifu,
Say that you wrought it carefully with tears.

Emma. No; God forbid the foul hypocrisy!
These blue and shining peacocks that I sewed
Were for pure love, and every lady-stitch
Entwisted for your sake.

Canute. A frank confession.
[*Aside.*] The glorious, golden heart!—Then we together
Will lay it on our kingly brother's tomb.
Emma, the holy places I have wrecked
Make ruin in my dreams.

Emma. With all my relics

You shall give reparation : we will found
Great houses. [*Aside.*] Now his eyes are shed on me
Full as the morning sun.—And for our England
We will take common thought.
Canute. Her sons shall serve
One God and worship Him, one Christendom
For ever hold, and with right truthfulness,
Even as thou, shall love Canute their lord.
And I have vowed, in that I basely slew
Their hero-king, that all my altered years
Shall be a great atonement, and accomplish
The best of his conception. We are led
By baffling roads to wisdom, but a light
Creeps ever after as we step along;
I turned back in my sin, and then I saw
The dogging lustre. Let us take our gift,
Your work, my queen, to Edmund's sepulchre.
This is to be a pilgrim :—the new life
Is full of blessing. Come! [*Exeunt into the Church.*]

THE CUP OF WATER.

"Earth's young significance is all to learn."

Robert Browning.

PREFACE.

THE story dramatised in these pages is taken from one of "the projects or arguments of poems" given in the recent, complete edition of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's works.

Among these "arguments" there is indeed one bearing so unmistakably the stamp of the poet's genius that to handle it would be profane. The fragment of *Michael Scot's Wooing* enfolds the germ of a ballad that must have surpassed even *Rose Mary* in strength of spiritual imagination. *The Cup of Water* is a simpler theme, untouched by the peculiar magic of the author's style,—a ballad in outline, yet full of suggestion of the "inner whispers" and struggles of the heart. I have taken it reluctantly from the dead hands of the poet whom, as artist, I so profoundly revere, not, let me once for all assure my readers, with the thought of continuing work he has begun, but rather of modifying for dramatic purposes material he has left unused.

June 1, 1887.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

ALMUND, a young King.
HUBERT, Almund's Friend.
REUBEN, an old Gardener.
CARA, a woodland Girl.
MILLICENT, a Princess, betrothed to Almund.

SCENE. A Wood—twice removed to the Garden of Millicent's Castle.

ACT I.

SCENE I. *The Wood.*

Enter ALMUND *and* HUBERT.

Almund. The woods are leafless, but the hazel-twigs
Are sprouting; if one hangs one's head aside,
'Tis green against the sky. Our callow spring
Is chilly, wild, and petulant so often
I am not much surprised to feel this ice
Among the pushing buds.

Hubert. Surprised—not you!
The even tenour of your disposition
Will never own a marvel; while for me
There's novelty in every change of day;
Faces distract my humour, and the tunes
A minstrel strikes up one upon another
Ring through my blood and take away my breath
With simple fascination.

Almund. Yes, dear lad;
It is your gaiety and bubbling youth
That keep our bond so fresh.

Hubert. Oh, I am sure
There is no sweeter fervour in the world
Than that of early friendship, when it flows
From childhood's fount, and two unhindered spirits
Shake the same gusty tempests from their brows,

Welcome the same soft sun, and face together
Each day's new, yet familiar, circumstance.
With women it is different; they keep
So far apart, and do not care to listen
Unless one speak of love.

Almund. They choose a theme,
The sole to which God deigns to lend an ear.
The racking terror one is not beloved
Once laid to rest, the deeper aim of speech
Attains its goal, and one may give one's tongue
To gaiety, as yonder babbling brook,
Babbling of nothing. Ah, we reach its source
Beside this wretched hut; the moss is trodden
Around, the starry spurges of the spring-time
Grow gold about it, and the withered leaves
Crackle above the runlet. Yonder stoops
A maiden with her cup,—and I am thirsty,
Although I did not know it.

[*Enter* CARA *at a distance.*]

Hubert. What a frigid
And lonely look the little figure has!

Almund. A starving daisy!—Girl, you have a cup,
And I am thirsty. Will you give me drink?

Hubert. Ay, catch this bankside dribble for us, lass.

Cara [*to* ALMUND]. Yes, sir. [*Going to the fountain.*]

Almund. Oh, Hubert, watch how she is bending,
As if her ear were open to some secret
Among the mouldered ferns.

Hubert. She's lovely, lovely,
Provokingly demure.

Almund. The cup is full.

Hubert [*to* CARA]. Serve me the first, and I will hand it on.

Why do you pause and tremble?

Cara. He shall have it. [*Pushing past* HUBERT.]

No, no! He asked me.

Almund. Gently, child! I'll kiss

The edge, and then my friend shall have his draught.

Cara. But you shall drink. It is for you.

Almund. What, first,

When a dear comrade asks? Where were my manners,

My charity?

Cara. He tried to snatch the cup;

He has not drunk, I pulled it from his lips.

You said that you were thirsty, and for you

I caught the rill. Drink, drink!

Hubert. How laughable!

Almund. My friend before me! Take the cup to him.—

[*Aside.*] What passion in the hazel eyes! O God,

I am betrothed; I know it like a curse

That has begun to work. She turns away

With piteous submission; as a blast

I bend her spirit.

Hubert [*to* CARA, *taking the cup*]. Bravely offered now,

You pretty scold! Why, Almund, there are tears

Splashed on her cheek—a tempest in a second.

Almund [*aside*]. To comfort her, enfold her to my heart,

And keep her!

Hubert. Jove! I ever was esteemed
A scoffer at the ladies: this bright wildness
Of sudden crying washes off my guilt,
And I am all for love.—Up with your apron,
And dry your eyes; we only want the water
You gathered from the bank. Where do you live?

Cara. Close by.

Hubert. Within that hovel?

Cara. Yes.

Hubert. How shortly
You answer, such a nipping tongue you have! [*Passing the cup to* ALMUND.]

Almund. You do not live alone?

Cara. Sir, with my father,
But quite alone. By day he fells the trees;
A great way off I sometimes hear his axe,
When I am sitting lonely; and at night
He sleeps within his cabin.
[*Coming up to* ALMUND.] Drink again!

Almund [*drinking*]. All that is left; yet all was meant for me.

Cara. Give me the cup. I'll hold it to the stone,
And bring it running over.

Hubert. What a bound!
As freakish as a February lamb's.

Cara. Full, full as ever.

Almund. I will drain it, child.
No passing on,—you see, the very cupful
You meant for me at first, at last I drink,
No jot abated.

Hubert. You are talking now
Above her head.
Almund. Her soft look understands.
Hubert. I love that gentleman, I am his friend;
Will you not turn, and give me but a smile?
There's a gay, little woman. Now a kiss! [*Snatching one.*]
How swift a change! Her childhood is all gone;
Adorably a girl, she shrinks and flushes
The wild-wood red of yonder whortle-blooms.
Ah, I have kindled love with just a touch,
And stung the bud with light. Oh, joy! Oh, love!
Almund. Come, let us go. I will no longer wait;
The wind is keen among these boughs. Good-bye.
Hubert. Farewell, delicious hermit.
[*To* ALMUND.] That is cruel!
Note her sly modesty—she waves to you,
And only you. It is a lovely method
That virgins have of hiding what they hope
To turn the other way in all they do.
[ALMUND, *unperceived by* HUBERT, *throws a kiss to* CARA.]
And, hark, that is her little trill, a spirt
Of song, the early bird. [*Exit* CARA.]
Almund. She's immature,
And like the very month of March,—as tart,
Impetuous, provoking. It is sweet
When Spring is thought about, and is not here.
Hubert. Almund, I love her, love her! You were moved;
I saw her charm strike inward. Do not wince;

If you are plighted, you are yet too young
To have no idle fancies. She is worthy
My love, although she is a cottager?
Almund. That's nothing; burn up all such circumstance
If you would love indeed. To ashes with it!
Hubert. How vehement your tone!
Almund [*abstractedly*]. To be beloved
Even from the very fountain of the heart,
To touch the well-head of a maiden-passion,
The bright spring from the rock; in the cool draught
To feel the virgin, solitary years,
And win access to the deep flow and current
Of the dark water-bed among the hills;—
It is a miracle one fears to greet,
A sign that does not modify events,
But re-adjusts the soul.
Hubert. You brood on love
Too solemnly; it is a simple joy.
Almund. I talk at random. How these catkins dust
One's velvet! You are happy?
Hubert. Oh, I feel
That all my merriment of disposition
Was but a childish matter; the man's rapture
Steadies me and ennobles. Yet I swear
She much preferred you till I took that kiss,
And all my fervour crept into her face.
I must not tease my wayward anchorite,
Or she will run to you; that brow of yours
Seems to extend protection.

Almund [*aside*]. She is mine.
The water came not straighter from the earth,
Than she herself to me.
Hubert. You are unmindful;
I vainly prate to one in reverie,—
Indifferent to my fortune.
Almund. May you win her!
You are my friend.
Hubert. I doubt not she will listen;
The small, cold cheek grew ruddy. We shall wed,
When you espouse your Millicent.
Almund [*aside*]. Thus God
Severs, without the clemency of death. [*Exeunt.*]

SCENE II. *The Wood. Next day.*

Enter HUBERT.

Hubert. How my heart throbs, and how philosophers
Would laugh to see me hurry to this inlet
Of winding turf amid the rusted leaves;
For love, they say, is like the pretty dint
In the green pasture that, with use, becomes
A beaten, dusty road! Oh, not with her!—
She has such moods to follow; she is changeful
As this tempestuous morning. What a wreck
Of spring's bright sheddings on the ground amid
The pine's red autumn-refuse! Broken life!
I will not moralize; I'll call her name.
What syllables will bring her? She's a darling,
Miniature's self, the point of space, yet all

I can conceive, all that my heart requires.
Is there no means to bring her? Hark! Be quiet,
All treble voices of the meagre season;
Here's a wild catch a-singing. Oh, the glee!
Cara [*singing afar*].

Where winds abound,
And fields are hilly,
Shy daffodilly
Looks down on the ground.

Rose-cones of larch
Are just beginning;
Tho' oaks are spinning
No oak-leaves in March.

Spring's at the core,
The boughs are sappy.
Good to be happy
So long, long before!

[*Running to him.*] Where is your friend?
Hubert. To-day I come alone.
You must not fancy, little maid, that I
Am but another's shadow. Let me keep
These restless fingers [*tries to kiss her*]. Ah, it comes again,
Your colour of the bilberry's flowering tufts.
My kiss is not forgotten? 'Twas to warm
Your icy cheek my lips grew pitiful;
But when they rested there, and chased the frost,
They longed to lead up summer to your face
By kissing, ever kissing. Do not look
So harshly coy. O little, woodland girl,
I'm making love.

Cara. I love, I love. I made it
As droplets from the great earth filled my cup;
I made it yesterday. I love, I love!
Hubert. How shrill the passion of this tiny throat!
You loved me at first sight; so I loved you,
And shall. . . Oh, now I know there is *for ever*
To make room for such loving.
Cara. Do you think
That he can love like that?
Hubert. You mean the king?
Cara. No, not the king. My lover is a man
Who tells me he is thirsty; I have never
Seen anything so noble in my life.
He bade me give you drink. He is not proud,
He did not make me humble in my heart,—
I leapt within.
Hubert. Hush, hush! I shall be angry.
How dare you speak of loving him? It is
A fearful treason. What, a tiny subject,—
The least, sure, that he governs,—to presume,
As if she were a princess, to call lover
Her sovereign lord! There, there! You did not know
It was a king who showed you courtesy.
Now you will understand. You see those fences,—
The flowers that grow inside you never touch.
Cara. Oh, yes; I climb the paling for the clumps
Of juniper, and for the jay's blue plume,
That glitters so with the black bars across:
I never heed what's written to forbid;

It is all made for me on either side
The bit of mossy fencing: that I know.
Hubert. Well, you may snatch the flowers; but there are things
Quite out of reach, that it is wickedness
Even to want. You must be dutiful,
And glad to fill your pitcher for the king,
When he rides down the forest; but to dream
That you could marry him! His mate is chosen
In Millicent, a noble lady, honoured
By all the people. Do not grow so black
Across this forehead,—such a withered sadness,
Such bleak despair!
Cara. Why, you have nearly killed
All in my bosom.
Hubert. Sit upon these logs,
Against my arm, and let me tell you, child,
As you have loved in silly ignorance
One who could never give the least return,
Who dare not, and who would not; I have loved
Less madly, but with passion like to yours,
You, only you.
Cara. I hate her.
Hubert. God above!
You startled me with that short virulence,
Those grinding teeth. Be silent, wicked lass.
Cara. Cara would slay her.
Hubert. Oh, is that your name?
How lovely and enticing; why, the winds
Are heart-tied to the sound. Cara, be gentle,

Put by this dreary wrath, and let me kiss
The loathsome curses from your lips. Come, come,
Ripple the mouth to beauty, let these eyes
Take on their vanished glances.
Cara. He is mine;
A thief has hold of him, my own, my own,
My king, my love, my love!
Hubert. He never was,
Never will be your love. This is the nonsense
That women, who know nothing of the world,
Prate to their narrow souls. The king would laugh
To hear you chirp such folly.
Cara [*springing from* HUBERT, *and standing apart*].
It's more wicked
Than anything that's done. I know what hurts.
I plucked once a big bough of apple-bloom;
I wanted it to hold down in my frock,
And smell; they said it was too good for me,
I should have let the apple-tree alone
To be of use in autumn. All my pleasure
Was robbed,—they tried to snatch the bough away;
I ran and buried it, for I was glad
It should be wet and grimy in the soil.
It is so dreadful to make anything
That springs up in the heart seem black and wicked;
And it is such a lie! The king would laugh?
He had a still, grave face; I am quite sure
That he would never laugh at anything
So terrible and sudden. Why, the oak
Has a white, bony bough amid the leaves;

That's where the lightning struck. I do not laugh,
I think what it must suffer 'neath the green,
So scathed and ugly.

Hubert. Cara, do not put
Such hatred in your eyes; if the great lady
Who loves the king—

Cara. Great ladies cannot love.
You must be poor and famished to be hungry;
No crust at home, and all the whortles picked
Before you reach the common—then the tears
Come choking. It's when everything is gone!
Why should I live?

Hubert. O Cara, for his friend.
Remember, I am here; and if you love
The king, would live for him, you must include
His cherished comrade Hubert in affection,
For I am half of Almund, and would die
To do him service.

Cara. Then you are not spiteful?
I thought you snatched the cup away to keep
My lover thirsty.

Hubert. Dearest, but to plague,
And daunt your pretty eagerness, that seemed
Excessive to a stranger.

Cara. But I knew
All through me that I loved him.

Hubert. See, this cloak,
And ring, blood-red, were his. Ah, swiftest kisses
Light on these senseless objects. Will you, Cara,
Touch what he never cared for, and refuse

The least caress to what he holds most dear,
His living friend, myself? [*She kisses him.*] Divine the freshness,
The firm assault, the intrepidity
Of this short kiss! Until I marry her,
'Twill be a smarting memory.
Cara. He loves you,
Have you not all you want?
Hubert. No; for I long
To take you to my arms.
Cara. Are you not filled
With everything you need? I want and weary
Simply because you said he did not love,
And could not love me.
Hubert. Terrible the tears
That cannot gather, but are in the look!
Child, will you take this ring he used to wear,
And think of me as giving it?
Cara. Oh, sir,
I'll never lose it.
Hubert. Hold the finger out;
Now you are my betrothed. Love, are you faint?
Cara. I felt it like his grasp, his claim; my body
Was frightened with its joy.
Hubert [*aside*]. Only his chiding
Can end this strange distraction. On her hand
The crimson jewel, like the winkling red
Upon the hazel, seems familiar, settled
Where it should fitly be.—Think you are mine
Now that I leave you lonely. [*Going.*]

Cara. Gentleman—
Hubert. No, Cara, I am Hubert.
Cara. If you meet him,
Oh, tell him I am his, a weary child,
Tired out since yesterday. [*Exit* HUBERT *mournfully.*]
I'll go along
The wood, and say it over to myself,
He cannot, cannot love me; but I know
Deep in my heart he does. There was a gift—
The king had something for me in his eyes;
And when he waved good-bye. . . I am quite sure
God made him for me; he will come again. [*Exit.*]

ACT II.

SCENE I. *A Terrace-garden.*

Enter ALMUND.

Almund. Not all at once! It comes too suddenly
To learn one's youth from the sharp cry of love.
There was no preparation,—my whole body
Answers that eager girlhood. Love, love, love,
Without which we are made of the mere clay
Of the world's agèd floor! Not all at once!—
Such news of honour and of joy—to be
Chosen of God to add the master-touches
To His unfinished work: He gives the lover
His coy girl Eve to make a woman of,
To warm, to waken. Ah, those changeful eyes—

To fill with love's imperishable light;
That cheek to alter,—such an obdurate,
Untempered cheek,—and a red mouth that never
Has learnt its heavenly use. I think I see her
What I would make her; I am called to it
As tiller to his toil. And ignorance—
The bonds I made in ignorance, before
I knew there were such powers, this youth, this loving;
Bonds senseless as the winter covenant
Of frost-bound forest that, at rise of sap,
Breaks into red and olive—must avail
For life's suppression! I am still a boy,
Young as they figure Cupid, so my Hubert
Hath often carolled. Ah, the sunny lad,
I could not be his rival; and the fact,
That must be nailed through flesh and bone to fasten
My unsubmitting senses to the cross,
Is this: *I am betrothed.*

[*Enter* HUBERT.]

Hubert. Almund, the darling,
That with her wildness and her storms has made
Such wreck of my astonished heart, refuses
To listen to my importunity.

Almund. Then do not urge her, Hubert, 'tis a nature
That must not be distressed.

Hubert. But she is certain,
Sweet fellow, that you love her: to prevent
Vain hope, I told her that you could not love,
Being betrothed.

Almund. Oh, Hubert, you said justly.

[*Aside*] Birds make no covenant; they sing and build;
There's no before and after—
Hubert. And I think
That I can comfort her.
Almund [*turning away*]. Stiff promises
And resolutions, and yon fleeting clouds
Grow golden as they travel.
Hubert. You will speak,
And make her understand? For, were you free,
I think that I could move you, in compassion
To woo her for yourself. To see her suffer
Is just like speaking to a child that's lost;
One cannot help, one cannot show the way,
And she keeps sobbing.
Almund. I will go to her.
Hubert. You must not break her heart.
Almund. By noon to-morrow
I'll yield her to more tender guardianship.
Oh, Hubert, it is sweet to be beloved—
'Tis to be born again, and find the world
Waiting the senses' pleasure, at one's feet.
It never hath been known how women love;
But those unpractised lips let fall a secret
Most terrible, transforming. Can you bear
The pressure of such passion?
Hubert. You forget,
Dear Almund, that she gave the cup to you.
Tis not for Hubert to be much beloved,
Nor is he covetous; 'tis but to soothe her
I ask your intervention. Did I think

That you would bruise her, with harsh, tyrannous,
Will-breaking words—

Almund. I shall be just and patient.
Come to the woods, and you will find it quelled,
This pitiful rebellion.

Hubert. Plead with her!
To you, love is a duty; but your friend
Is bold to promise summer to his wife,
That shall creep lingering round the agèd years
And recreate them golden.

Almund. I will offer
No blandishments;—an error to correct,
An ignorance, and mischief to remove,
And then my task is ended. Seek your bride
By that lone well amid the bulrushes,
Where I so often wander—

Hubert. And none drink!
A cheerless place, blocked by the meadow-sweet,
And willow-herb in autumn; I remember
Your moody haunt by the mud-stifled stream,
That now must be half-spectral with the stalks
Of skeleton, grim reeds. I hate the aspect
Of that neglected well where everything
Is put from its right purpose, or forgotten.
Bring me the lass where yesterday she stooped
Her pitcher in the spring.

Almund. Just at its source!
You shall have all your pleasure. [*Exit* HUBERT.]
How unconscious
In his beseeching and perplexity!

'Tis blessèd that he craves her, otherwise
I could be wild and wanton. [*Draws out tablets and writes.*]
[*To an old gardener who approaches.*] Reuben, take
This letter to your mistress.

Reuben. Ay, sir, and happy; but she hasn't left the terrace-walk an hour. It's my belief she spied you coming through the shrubs, for, bless you, sir, she was off, leaving her pruning-knife under the rose-tree,—her hair was a bit blown on her forehead, and her hands sort o' sticky. She likes you, sir, to see her in her best; and I shouldn't wonder if she isn't putting on that lavender gown took your fancy last June, with fresh sprigs at her bosom. I say to her, the taste of young gentlemen will change. I've worked for the great families,—they like carnations one year, and the next nothing but pansies will please them. I'll be up the teep in no time; for, sir, she'll think more of this [*holding up the letter*] than of the buds on the tree that's named after you, though she smells at the pink blossoms as if they were lilacs in full bloom. It's all sweet, I reckon, when one is young, and of a warm climate inside like the vine-house. [*Exit.*]

Almund. So it should be in youth—all sweet. How hateful
Become the creatures that one ought to love,
What heathendom our past with them! That day
When we stood peering down into the stream
Together, and I smiled: *Look, Millicent,*
How Heaven mates us! we had brought our books
To learn by heart; but even then I feel

I could not bear her touch upon my shoulder,
And when we read of dire Necessity
I thought she had that form. She shared my studies,
The noble woman-scholar, and I fancied,
[*Enter* MILLICENT.]
I fancied that I loved her. Oh, my Hubert,
Gleeful and foolish in yon purple copse,
How you will mock my wisdom! Down the beeches
The lady paces in that blemished gown
I hate the long, limp folds of. I remember
The child wore a blue, spotted skirt, and apron
Sprinkled with berries. Well, there are three yards
Betwixt us still. Better at once begin.
Now she is nearer I discern a smile
Irrelevantly silver on her brow;
I hate such unwooed shining.—Millicent,
There is not any reason in the world
Why we should not be married?

Millicent. But this query,
Abrupt, and so impulsive, furnishes
Sufficient reason. I would have you wait
Until you are a man.

Almund. To love you better?
Oh, that can never be! You ask too much;
For the boy's adoration cannot wear
On into manhood.

Millicent. But I dreamed, beloved,
That something fairer would remain, a rose
Of June, when all spring's flickering flowers were shed.
I have so watched you.

Almund. And the vigilance
Were pardonable in maternal eyes,
But in a wife—
Millicent. Almund, if I believed
The noble spirit you have made my own
Would not grow riper 'neath my wifely care,
I never would ensheath it in my love.
Dear, I must foster you.
Almund. I shall not answer
Your foolish dreams; put by your expectations,
And let me play my part: we lived retired,
But my year's kingship has already taught me
I cannot be a vessel to be moulded
By any woman's will. I shall become
Another being as the years increase,
And your fond worship of my youth will vex
As any ancient, lapsed idolatry.
You too must change.
Millicent. The stream will darken, dear,
Infallibly, if there are clouds o'erhead.
Almund. I mean, I do not ask you to desire
Always my highest good—you must remember
If you are married to me, we shall meet
Not in elected moments, but in moods
Often discordant; you will find me sullen,
Morose, reserved, and must not diet me
With simples from your herbal: ask no questions,
Imagine nothing: let me find you merry,
If I need merriment, sad, when I grieve.
I speak thus frankly to prevent mistake,

And disappointment after we are married,
As we must be at once. The northern tribes
Have broken on us. I would leave a queen
To guard my kingdom.

Millicent. Whom you will not trust
To rule your heart.

Almund. Not the despotic way;
I must be free and irresponsible.
Is it so slight a thing that I can leave you
Sole regent of my kingdom? Would you rather
Sway my caprices than be made the mistress
And governor of all that I possess?
'Tis an unqueenlike choice.

Millicent. I have not made it;
We must no more interpret what the other
Suffers, or fails to suffer.

Almund. Many things
Disturb me. Hubert, my supremest soldier,
Is changed and petulant.

Millicent. What ails your Hubert?

Almund. He's deep in love.

Millicent. For the three thousandth time?

Almund. Once, as death strikes; one cannot tell before!—
The difference 'twixt innocence and guilt,
'Twixt peace and wildest ferment! Hubert loves
A forester's young daughter, and to-morrow
I go to bid her marry him: she's wilful.

Millicent. You speak from knowledge; you have looked on her.

Almund. She gave us drink as we rode down the wood.
To see his pride fall off him! He forgot
She was a peasant; the bright, naked feet
Were beautiful to him, and the wild hair,
That brushed one as she stooped,—no pony's mane
Is rougher, and our Hubert loves to see
A lady's tresses subject to her art;
Yet when this woodland lass—

Millicent. You do not name her.

Almund. She has no name, one does not think of that;
She carols like a bird—to Hubert's ear;
One holds one's breath to listen. He neglected
To ask her name.

Millicent. Almund, you are quite certain
That she will love him?

Almund. 'Tis enough for woman
To be beloved; she never must put forth
Her powers of loving; 'tis not to be borne.

Millicent. Yea, if she love her husband, tho' he slight her,
Unconscious of her worship, she can spend
Her unwooed kisses on her babes, and give
Her womanhood's crown jewels as an alms.
'Tis nobler surely than to wed unloving,
And hate the very moulding of the lip
One feeds from one's own bosom.

Almund. You forget
How Hubert dotes; the glory of great dames
Grows cloying and monotonous to one

Who once has seen a girl's breast heave with passion,
And watched her wonder at the miracle
That love was working in her. He is changed,
Humbled and changed; but we will do him honour;
He shall be made an earl.

Millicent. Simply for winning
His heart's desire—such conduct needs reward?
Nay, if the king himself had coveted
This girl—suppose it possible—and yet,
For sake of his pre-contract with a princess,
Renounced her, I indeed should count him worthy
Of gravest admiration. 'Tis not noble
To stoop from our conditions, which involve
Our duties; to forego, for sake of them,
Some pleasure that would tempt us from our place,
Would give a kingly impress to an action
Worthy a woman's deepest reverence,
And worship of a queen. Our bright-lipped Hubert
Is but indifferent to external things;
Yet this is somewhat: let us give to him
The title he despises.—And our wedding—
You wish to speak of it—affairs of state
Demand the form; but for the sacrament?

Almund. The bond, my princess, never shall be formal.
I leave you for these wild, uncertain wars,
My wife, to be the mother of the son
Our kingdom craves: there is no greater trust.

Millicent. Than that of regent—guardian too and nurse,

Protective of your treasure? You are weary
To-night and anxious; had I been your lady,
I should have begged you to disburthen, now
You crave but my queen's wisdom I retire,
And leave you to self-healing.

Almund. Millicent,
'Tis as you took the heliotropes away,
I love the scent of. There are fierce temptations,
And troubles of such sort as candour's self
May not give tongue to; this must be:—the maiden
Is reticent, for nature drops a secret
Most precious in her bosom; but the boy
Turns to wild conflict with the fiends.

Millicent. A husband
Fights with a strong-armed angel at his side;
You seek such safeguard 'gainst your enemies?
My Almund, it is yours. O lovely brows!
[*Stooping and kissing his forehead.*]
'Twixt welcome and farewell there is but little
In woman's life, except she be a queen,
As you will make me. Then all's different. [*Exit.*]

Almund. How sweet a majesty is in her steps,
How undeserved a grace! Now she is gone
'Tis as the ordering sunlight were withdrawn,
And each unguided action perilous.
Yet she approves my course, my Hubert's marriage,
Even our own—I am the more confirmed
To keep our contract. Just that little figure
To frighten to conformity. Ah me! [*Exit.*]

SCENE II. *The Wood.*

Enter ALMUND *and* CARA.

Cara. My dear is come, is come!
[*They clasp in a long, silent embrace.*]
Almund. O little love,
My woman, pre-elected from the hour
I was conceived a man, yet lost, forbidden!
All the great, germinating force that pushes
A leaf-bud forth has bounded to your mouth
To form that kiss.
Cara. Down in my heart it lay,
Panting to reach you all this long, long while,
My king, my lover.
Almund. Ah, to join these names,
As this frank voice is able!—By and bye
I'll face the severing hour. God, we may hold
For just a moment what we may not keep,
And thus conceive our sacrifice.
Cara. But listen:
I ran and gathered the white, blinking sallows,
The shoots of cuckoo-pint, and fallen cones,
To dress my fountain ready.
Almund. Is it true
You put these dabbling bunches round the spring
For me? Then they are dearer than the banners
That hailed me king.
Cara [*stooping over the spurges*]. I told you he would come,
You tiny flowers, and you would not believe;

Now look at him, and love him. You dear man,
I wonder what I had to think about
Before I saw you. Now I have no time
For sleep; I dare not go to bed at all,
Lest I should find it altered in my heart
When I awake; and sometimes in my bosom
I lose all breath, and dare not think of you,
The world is grown so large.

Almund. It is the freedom
Of love, that breaks all puny bonds, and rushes
Clean through our being to God's crystal sea.
Kiss me again.

Cara. But it is not *good-bye.*
I put my musk-pot in the window-sill,
And all is sweet and warm there in the sun
For hours; and I must do this every day,
If the young plant's to thrive. Again to-morrow,
And every day for ever you will come;
It never will be ended. All the birds
Are singing in me, and the crowds of flowers
Are tossing in my joy. You must not watch me
As you were putting by this happiness,
To think about hereafter. Thousand kisses
Keep growing for my lover; up they spring,
And I could dance to feel them.

Almund. Little mouth,
Your love were perfect if it kissed to death;
But I am strong; all voices wail in me
I cannot die. The glory of this moment
Is fearful, for it shows how black and small

We are in common life, when Memory
Makes gossip in our ears. Shall she be called
The mother of sweet poetry who fetters
All aspiration, drags us down to earth,
And makes us mortal, petty, scrupulous,
Slaves, cowards, fatalists? I must remember
Hubert will soon be here. Oh, Cara, Cara,
Did he not tell you that I am a king,
And you must never love me?

Cara. Your false friend,
He said you had a lady.

Almund. It is true.
Oh, what is hell but truth—a fiery candour!
[*Breaks from her.*]

Cara. Why do you cast me out into the wind?
You were my lover. Are you now the king,
The cruel king?

Almund [*throwing himself on the ground and burying his face in the grass*]. I cannot bear to hear
The foot-fall of her voice. God! she will come,
And bleat for me;—lambs wander over graves,
And stop, and bleat, and shake their woolly heads.—
I will be buried from her sight.

Cara. It hurts
Too much to leave off loving suddenly.
That is an early wasp,—they used to sting me
When they settled on my arm. How hard I feel!
I knew it must be terrible to freeze,
And broke the brook—it ached so underneath;
I know now how it ached. *I must not love him!*

I shall not any more: it is as certain
As that no breath can issue from the dead.
[*Shaking* ALMUND.] Turn back your face. Oh, you are
old and changed;
And yet you look as you would live for ever.
I cannot understand.
Almund. You raised my head
Too soon, before the penal change was over;
It was the moment of my sentence, dearest,
And it was more than I could bear to see
The buds, the ruby twigs, the darting light,
And your loved, early face.
Cara. You have put death
Far off. . . . I feel that I can never reach
So many miles away. I'm but a child,
And you have left me nothing.
Almund. God, I know
The pain to come is cruel, brutal, vile.
Cara. You do not know; you took the cup of
water,
And gave it to your friend. You do not love me.
Almund. I love you far beyond all kissing's pace,
Faster than thought, with every breath I draw.
Cara. Then keep me, keep me!
Almund. Little life, I cannot.
There is a lady, who for many years
Has loved me, not like you, but with affection
As strong as the unswerving confidence
She places in my honour.
Cara. And you love her?

Almund. Nay, Cara, not a whit. I do not love her,
Yet she shall be my wife.

Cara. Poor lady!

Almund. Cara,
If you can feel for her who keeps me from you,
Who severs us, a loving, unloved woman,—
Be yet a little kinder still, and pity
The man who cherishes, and longs for you,
My noble Hubert, who with thoughtless ardour,
As delicate as rash, has yet a way
Of touching like a nurse. My little, wounded,
Piteous Cara, let him take your hand,
And shelter you from loneliness.

Cara. Oh, cruel!
So base you spoil my love, you hurt it all,
Till I must cry for shame. I am too young,
Too mere a slip, to understand your wishes;
But they are cruel, cruel, and so wicked
That you will talk in vain.

Almund [*aside*]. Her chaste resentment
Lashes me like a wind.—Oh, Cara, Cara,
If I can yield to Hubert my dear passion,
My whole delight in you, while you, for me,
Will to my friend resign yourself in marriage,
Shall we not be united? He will join
Together our best goodness on the day
He marries you and owes you to my loss.
Could you but understand!

Cara. It is too bitter—
All that you say; it falls like flakes of snow.

I'm numb and hopeless, and my merry joys
Are dropping off for ever.
Almund. O my God!
Can it be rightly done—within her blood
To kill the blessèd life, and make its promise
A scattered vanity? Yet Hubert comes,
And Millicent awaits me, and the power
To gather joy unmerited belongs
In no-wise to my nature. Will you then
Receive from me my friend to be your husband,
To comfort you, to foster? Come, the tears
Are staunched at last; but do not clasp your hands,
And knot them like the little oak above.
Speak to me, Cara.
Cara. I am humble now.
Almund. What do you mean?
Cara. I will obey you, king.
Almund. How hard and cold your words!
Cara. For I am dead,
Dead to the spring, and hope, and mating-time.
Almund. Both blasted, both deformed, God looking on,
And April in the earth! We each are spoiled
For nature's stainless function; but the blight
Is deeper in my girl; for I am strengthened
By bonds and conscience. Hubert comes at last.
[*Enter* HUBERT *at a distance.*]
Cara [*springing up at Almund*]. I'll kill myself unless you promise me,
I'll curse you like a ghost unless you ask him

To let me give you water once a year,
To let me grasp your face into my being,
And hear your wintry voice. I'll curse your wife,
Your friend, and all you love so preciously—
Listen, you king, I'll curse them all unless
You make him vow.

Almund. Hubert will grant this favour.
[*Aside.*] Then there will be one day of resurrection,
One day the grave-clothes will be tenantless—
Oh, heavenly condition!

Hubert. Have you won,
My Almund?

Almund. She is yours.

Hubert. Then come to me,
My king-wooed joy! Almund, she does not stir;
You misinterpret.

Almund. No; she does but pause
To hear me ask a boon—that you and I
Shall meet her once a year upon the spot
Where first we saw her, by the creeping rill,
And she shall give to me alone a cup
Of the slow-dropping water. Will you grant
This wish of hers and mine? It is some comfort
For her new-aching grief. You understand—
I have been harsh and lofty.

Hubert. This is little,
A thing scarce worth the asking from a friend,
Who loves you, and who owes you everything,
Even his treasured bride. My Cara, rise,
Come to my arms. I do not ask a smile,

Until we know each other, and are friends
Well-learnt in love. Say, with your woodland voice,
That you are mine.

Cara. I'll marry you.

Hubert. Dear child,
You startle me; your voice has lost its tones
Of waking bird-songs; if indeed you care
No tittle for me, I may pine with grief,
But I will leave you happy.

Cara. Do not go;
Make me your wife.

Hubert. God witness that I will;
For I have loved these tiny lips, these eyes,
Thrilling with shadowed impulse, and a light
Of new-year sunbeams, loved them hour by hour,
Day after day, have thought of them at dawn,
At noon, and eve.

Almund [*aside*]. I loved her so entirely
I never saw her beauties one by one.

Cara. When I am married . . .
I will be good and gentle.

Hubert. Darling!

Cara. Do not
Believe I shall be disobedient.

Hubert. I never fear it, and your waywardness
Is lovelier than submission. Put aside
This anxious scanning of your new estate.

Cara. I will be meek and dutiful.

Hubert. Hush, hush!
You mind me of a bird whose nest is stolen:

An anguish of re-iteration pours
Sharp on the air. Do not be frightened, Cara,
To leave your home. My friend has given me
This tract of trees, and a lone castle near;
There shall you dwell, and freely as of yore
Shall haunt the spring, and pluck the shady flowers.
A piercing sunbeam strikes across your face;
Trust me, my love, we'll have no formal manners,
But roam the forest, you a woodland countess,
And I a rustic earl. Come, I have won
Your father, while the king was winning you.
You are my bride: bring with you all your graces,
And do not fear men's looks more than the glance
Of jays or critic squirrels; let your movements
Keep their alert caprices, and your voice
Its acrid key, and sudden songfulness.
Be all you were, and be my own besides,
But do not change.

Cara. I will be good.

Hubert. Come, come!
No more of that, it pains me. Like a child,
Kiss me to heal the hurt.

Cara. I will.

Hubert. The flavour,
The fine, elastic pressure of these lips
Is gone; but I forget, I must have patience,
Till you link Hubert's name with happiness,
With gifts, and life, and bounty. Do not trouble
That I should know how you have set your heart
Unwitting on the king; so loyally

I love him, I could give him even you,
Were he not plighted. We will only live,
Dearest, to do his pleasure.
Almund. Once a year,—
Never meanwhile,—I meet in frosty March
The good earl's wife.
[*Aside, kissing her brow.*] God seals upon their foreheads
Those whom He chooses, His elect. Farewell.
[*Exeunt.*]

ACT III.

SCENE I. *The Terrace-Walk.*

Enter MILLICENT.

Millicent. I have not seen my terrace-walk two years.
Now that the rumour reaches me my husband
Is coming home, I have put by my rule,
And left the busy city for a day,
To see if the young sycamore he planted
Be grown, and all the bosky paths kept clear.
He used to love the garden. In my absence
There have been changes, the great storm has broken
That row of poplars that shut out the country;
We can see Hubert's lodge; the woody fringe
Is full of gaps. How fares the lady Cara?
[*Enter* REUBEN *at a distance.*]
There's my old man to gossip with; but yet

It were more queenly to await events,
And give them quiet audience. [*To* REUBEN.] This ivy,—
Reuben, your master likes it clipped in March;
It overtops the wall.

Reuben. Now what an eye!
There has not been the time, though I'm a rare one
For clipping; you can scarcely tell the nature
Of any of these trees, I've twisted them
So to my pattern. You, I recollect,
Were always for a garden a bit wild;
The weeds, you thought, were prettty on the walks
Where they could do no harm.

Millicent. But the king likes
The even gravel; you can give me pleasure
Only as you content him.

Reuben. That's the point.
I never saw a lady like yourself
So anxious; all would now be apple-pie,
If you had a fresh colour. When I wheeled you
I' my barrow down the walks, and made you wreaths
Of hen-and-chicken daisies every day,
Save Sunday, when you whimpered,—why, you were
A pretty one, and no mistake, with solid,
Round, rosy cheeks; you've fallen off in flesh,
And lost that placid look the master liked;—
Come now, I know he liked it, for one day,
When you were but a princess, he was standing
And looking toward your lattice, while I cursed
The bitter, grating wind: *Ah, there's fair weather*
For you, I doubt not, Sir, I said—bit riled

To see him staring so; but when I looked,
And saw you like a balsam at the pane,
I did not wonder.

Millicent. Is his friend arrived,
The good lord Hubert? All our preparations
Are vain, if he be absent. For two summers
They have been kept apart by these long wars,
My husband in the north, and his dear captain
Striving to quell the western tribes. No rumour
Has reached you, Reuben, of the earl's return?

Reuben. Not a word; but his lady must be missing him. It's lonely for a woman when her child dies, and she has to look after his burial. We can put the little things in their coffins. It is not fit a mother should do that,—she's too warm and tender.

Millicent. A child, a child! And did you say a son?
But the babe's dead and blasted!

Reuben. Well, I own
I never thought good luck would come of it
After the christening.—Seemed presumptuous
Of a young wench that might have been my daughter
To make her brat a namesake of the king.

Millicent. The lady Cara had then a fair babe?
Would it had lived! Reuben, you misconstrue;
'Twas duteous of the mother to remember
Who raised her husband to nobility.
Most gladly had the king been god-father
To our dear Hubert's son.

Reuben. But *Almund, Almund!*
To hear the common children shout his name!

For she would take the little fellow down
To paddle in the spring and sail the flowers ;
And all the villagers were fond of her,
And the boy too. You must not take it ill ;—
I think it right that you should know ;—the women
All said he was the image of the king.
I went myself to have a look at him
One day, and it was wonderful—not like !—
Why, the blue larkspurs come up blue this year,
And last ;—he'd got the lashes, and the eyes,
And the high forehead. It had been more decent
To call him Hubert. Taking all in all
I think it is as well he's with the Lord,
Where he can do no mischief with his looks,
Poor innocent !

Millicent. O Reuben, you forget
His mother.

Reuben. But if she'd no rights to him ?
Lord, how you startle me with that hot face ;
'Tis like the day of judgment,—flame of hell,
Before one gets a hearing.

Millicent. You remember
Your master when he courted me,—his aspect
Might well seem god-like to a peasant girl.
One day, at hunt, grown thirsty in the wood,
He asked for drink : Lord Hubert loved the child
Who filled the cup, and, at the king's command,
She married him, but never has forgotten
Her bright, brief day of honour. Once a year
She offers tribute from the spring by which

She first obeyed her king. If her sweet son
Were like him, it is hard to think he died,
Being the only creature in the world
Who might have brought some comfort to your mistress.
Let the truth travel like a cleansing frost
Through all the country side. You promise me?

Reuben. Why, lady, it's too much to remember, and you knock it so into my head with your sharp, clanging voice,—it bewilders me. But I take it you're satisfied with the young master; leastways, whatever you think, you won't have tongues wagging. I'll quiet 'em, I'll say no man can tell the colour of a bloom before it opens. It doesn't depend on the seed. And they won't contradict me. So, good even. [*Exit.*]

Millicent. A barren wife, and the young boy born like him
Not his—so much dishonour and no sin;
All faithful to their vows!
[*Looking towards* HUBERT'S *castle.*] The sun breaks out
After the gusty rain, and rims yon towers.
Ah, Hubert's wife can take him to a grave,
Where they can weep together.

[*Buries her face in her hands.*]

[*Enter* ALMUND.]

Almund. Millicent.

Millicent. You are not unexpected, though you come
More suddenly than looked for. All your fields
Are sown for harvest, and the river dammed
Just where you thought to stop the current's rush;
Old Reuben has been singing many a day

Over the rose-shoots and the trim arcade.
O husband, why so sudden a return?
I scarcely have prepared . . .
Almund. You are too noble
For ghastly fooling, for this weary talk
Of preparation. Ready for my coming!
Yes, ready with your sobs.
Millicent. A little weeping
That I was desolate.
Almund. I have not heard
Ill news; I feel it in the air, and see it
Now in your face. Why did you weep? I thought
It was because you could not lift a son
To give that heart-deep greeting that a wife
No other way can utter. Tell me all:
The pulses of my heart are muffled bells
That toll and shiver:—give me utmost truth,—
This pausing is unworthy. [*Grasping* MILLICENT'S *arm.*]
Millicent. Hubert's wife
Bore him a son, a lovely boy that died
Just as he prattled *Mother.* He was nursed
Beside a forest-brook; the peasants say
He had your stamp on every lineament,
His eyes your very own—and I rejoice.
Almund. Immeasurable faith! You hold my name
Unspotted by my people's vile suspicion;
You love the likeness that another wrought
In pure idolatry? I thought you cold,
Too cold to be a mother, and a softness,
A joy has crept into your face as though

You answered a babe's cry. We draw together;
My Millicent, weep on.

Millicent. The little lad
Was christened Almund.

Almund. But the mother lived?

Millicent. She lives for you to comfort her.

Almund. Not dead—

Millicent. There is another remedy than death;
It shall be given her. This is a moment
When speech takes on its full reality,
And says the whole within us. You have loved
This cottage-girl as God would have a man
To love a woman; you fulfilled His dream.
I have upheld you in your covenant
To me, and made you break the holy law
Of perfect, human passion. O my king,
You were a noble boy, and year by year
The beauty goes from off you.

Almund. Millicent—

Millicent. We each have sinned; but I, because I love you,
'Scape inner ruin: you, my tortured husband,
Are cramped by loveless honour, straitened, spoiled,
Grown hard and bitter, though your conquering lips
Keep violent mastery o'er pain and want.

Almund. O God, you can befriend my agony,
You suffer with my passion? Noble wife,
I, who can never love you, from henceforth
Worship with all my soul.

Millicent. I have confessed,

My Almund, and committed to my voice
The silences of womanhood, that you
Might hear the love that you can never see,
Because I have no child. My lips present
A gift of such devotion as no travail
Hath ever brought to birth : a solemn gift
To hold forth to a husband. Take the vows,
Given in marriage, back again. How pale
You stand, as if misjudging me ! I know
That you are pure as I in the fulfilment
Of our unblessèd bond.

Almund. Oh, I could curse
My tongue that will not say what still I feel,
That troth should be for ever.

Millicent. Would you keep me
The thing I am, a wife, and the eternal
Thou shalt not to a man's felicity,
That he perforce must hate ?

Almund. I do not, hating
Myself alone.

Millicent. I will deliver you.
Your voice grates on me,—'tis a voice in irons.

Almund. O fearful love ! But you forget my Hubert
Has he no rights ?

Millicent. Almund, I do not think
Of Hubert ; I will answer for no man
In such a coil as ours. What I have said
Lies between you and me ; I loose the fetters
That make your home a prison. You shall speak
All in your writhing heart, renew its passions,

And fear no impious jealousy, no pride
Of injured claims. I pray you to entrust
Your pain, your deathless love for Hubert's wife,
To me, who, self-divorced from you, shall give
No mis-becoming comfort, no unchartered
Compassion and relief.

Almund. Then be my friend,
Not the dishonoured wife whom I shall never
Forgive myself for wedding. Millicent,
As no young bridegroom dare, I lay my soul
Naked before your eyes. I thought I loved you;
Suddenly passion leapt in me,—pure fervours
Of life; I strove to quell them, and I could not,
But whelmed them in suppression, till my brain
Was mad with evil. O my woman-friend,
I know the deeps of sin as none can know
Who do ill acts, for I have spent my days
Looking down, down into the pit of hell,
Because my love lay drowning in the slime,
And I must watch, in agony that often
Pressed through my flesh as dew, yet dried the tears
For ever from my eyes.

Millicent. You pause; my pity
Stretches beyond all horror.

Almund. Then it is
For her, not me. The anguish of my guilt,
My holy love polluted, were as nothing
In misery beside the pressing thought
Of how she suffered,—such a child, and yet
All womanhood was waiting in her heart,

Till I should wed her. The first year I went,
And with her husband met her by the spring,
She looked at me until I only saw
Great, busy eyes that seemed to use my face
As yarn to fasten on a spinning-wheel.
I nearly died ; upon my horse's neck
I fell unconscious.

Millicent. You are trembling now.

Almund. With weakness at the outrush of my secrets
From loneliness and burial : 'tis like
The passage of an earthquake.

Millicent. Let me press
This burning forehead, for my hands are cold,
While the divulging torrent of your voice
Takes heed of nothing, but that I attend,
Too merciful to comfort.

Almund. I am freed,
But all in ruins. Now you know the worst
And best of my despair—its lustful madness,
Its rooted love to her. As if I knelt
Beside Christ's mother I am not ashamed,
For your compassion, fouled by no reproach,
Stings not my blood.

Millicent. And once again this brow
Is frank as in your boyhood, just as open,
Thank God !

Almund. I like to feel your touch, it seems
To know me, and to soothe each painful throb
Close to its source. But, Millicent, to-day

According to my promise I should enter
The forest.

Millicent. Yes, I know, and you must hasten;
The day wears on. Nay, do not start so wildly,
For if you are ungentle, you will scare
The little, childless mother, and may kill her
Who is your Hubert's wife.

Almund. I will be tender.
Touch me again! Farewell, my great, new friend,
The guardian of my soul. I kiss these hands,
These saving hands. Your eyes—how beautiful!

SCENE II. *The Wood, by the Spring.*

Enter CARA.

Cara. The little face
Grew hard, I dared not kiss it any more;
And now, unless he come—It is the day.
How the birds quarrel!—I must just return,
And dig the little grimy body up.
All night I listened close down on the turf
If he should call me; but he cannot call
With those hard, alien lips. He seems to hate me,
And I hate him,—I hate, I hate the dead,
I do not want to see them any more,
They are such changelings. When the neighbours came
And looked at the stone image, with no trace
Of want or feebleness, they called it like
The little, tender, playful, tottering lad
I stooped to steady. God could never mould

A baby's dimpling cheek;—it's tears, tears, tears!
He shapes the dead, and alters all the lines
O' the lids and mouth; one cannot find the old,
Sweet spots for kisses. Hubert will return
And pet me. I have seen a dog some stranger
Passes his hand across; it gives no pleasure,
The creature feels it's kind, and then walks off
More wretched. Ah, the baby did not know,
He never tried to comfort. There's no use
For Cara in the world: the old are useless,
But then they are half-dead. I cannot cry,
I know if once I sobbed that I should never
Catch the sweet air again. The leaves are budding,
These chestnut-leaves. Oh, they have woolly wraps,
They're young—quite little ones.

[*Enter* ALMUND.]

Almund. A widowed creature,
With strange, snow-sprinkled hair, and empty eyes.
I dare not startle her,—she stands too nigh
The precipice of death for me to thrill her
With joyful news.

Cara [*turning and springing to him*]. Why, he is grown a man!
O Almund, Almund. This is wonderful!
It hurts so at my heart. It must be years
Since it all happened. Do not let me loose;
If you will only stay a little while
'Twill be all over; you can settle then
Whether it's wrong or right. Pull down your curls
For me to play with. Silky, summer hair!

I made his fine like this. Oh, I am happy.
Don't speak, and change it.

Almund. Cara, listen! Hush!
I am not married to the queen. I'm free.

Cara. And I am Hubert's wife! It makes me laugh;
It is not true, and a wise king knows better
Than make believe. I had a little son;
God knew the truth; He built him step by step
Like you—a perfect miniature, and yet
With hair less auburn. I was glad to give him
Cara's own hazel threads. He's yours and mine.
You'll see him when you bury me; break open
The tiny coffin; let us lie together.

Almund. I dare you speak of death; you shall not die
Till you are mine. What is your woman's hunger?
You faint with it; but when a man must fast
His appetite grows eager for revenge.
Now, Cara, you must pay to me the debt
Of love's long-rankling score. Come, cuddle close;
Each stir and change you make is chronicled
Through all my body, and the blessedness
Repeats that I have got you in my arms,
Till I can just believe it. These long years
My life has been a barren sea-shore washed
By surging floods of passion; nothing grew there,
Nothing took root, there was no food, no shelter.
Don't travel far away with those soft eyes!
You're thinking of the child; it maddens me.

Cara, I'm thirsty; give me of love's drink!
Have you forgotten?
Cara. No, for I remember
A lady loves you. Almund, it is fearful . . .
Almund. Call me the king.
Cara [*smiling*]. I'm used now to the name.
I shouted to my little lad so often
On the brow of the big field where there's the echo,
Simply to hear the name. O Almund, Almund,
There must not be this misery again;
We women cannot bear it. Once I saw her;
She could not speak, but she just pressed my hand,
And kissed me. I will give you back to her,
If you will only stay a little while.
Now say it over to me like a hymn,
How you have always loved me. Do not promise
That you will not forget—I have no fear;
It's graven in your eyes. But those three years
You did not come—before too he was born;
I must not think of it. . . . It hurts again
Here at my heart. O Almund, Almund, Almund!
Something shrieks in me; I must call the child
Across the fields. . . .

[*She shrieks and falls back dead.*

Almund. O God, she is a mother.
The small, bleak spirit shrills out in the air
A cry for love, and I am starving here:
'Tis death's strange irony; and once she stood
The red lips kissing me as fast as dew
Is shaken from a thorn. Oh, I shall find

All the great years of hell inadequate
To mourn this mighty error and defeat.—
To put such gift away, and youth and manhood
Stirring within me! I refused her love,
And must cohabit now with lust for ever.
She does not heed me. She is soft, maternal,
And full of heavenly cares. I cannot touch her,
I can but stand here damned and impotent,
Most bitterly aloof, and unremorseful
Of everything save virtue.

[*Enter* HUBERT.]

Take her, Hubert;
Though whether she be yours or mine, I know not—
An ancient gift come back upon my hands
While you were at the wars. I gave her once;
You begged her of me: women are not chattels
To deal with as one's generosity
May prompt or straiten. . . .

Hubert. Almund, she is dead!
Cara, my little wife,—oh, she has broken
Her tender heart with grieving for our boy.
No babe to fondle,—no poor, clumsy Hubert
To light the piteous smile for,—so you asked
Grim death to take you where you might have rest,
You little, weary creature. Why, 'tis something
To see you lying, love, the pretty mouth
Freed from all struggle, and the hazel eyes
Fallen asleep,—they were the dearest eyes
In all the world,—but when they looked so dumb,
When nothing happened in them, and they grew

A prison for the tears, I could but pray
To fall in battle, and forget the pain;
Yet all this while you have been happy, sweet,
And singing with the child. You promised me
You would be happy when the babe was born.
This wavy hair! O Cara, we must smooth it;
You must remember, love, that you are dead,
And we must have some state; the king himself
Will lift you. Almund, I could never rid her
Of that poor, superstitious, fond belief
You loved her: it would please her now to think
You helped to bury her [*looking up*]. What have you done?
You have not murdered her? I thought you came
To comfort her, to drink the promised cup,
And found her lifeless: but some guilty deed
Is written on your brow.

Almund. Death came between,
Or you had found me an adulterer.
Now, Hubert, judge me.

Hubert. Hush, for there are devils
This sweet face must not wot of. You accuse her
To me, her husband, who am sure she loved you
Heart-brokenly as God would have a sinner
Yearn for His favour. Could you misinterpret?
You have fierce, flaming eyes. Oh, it is cruel
To think they fell on her.

Almund. Yes, I have lusted;
Yet, Hubert, she died quiet in my arms.
I have not wronged you.

Hubert. But your face is flint,
As when I trusted you to plead for me,
And found my Cara crouching and subdued,
And you a moody tyrant. You've no touch
For such fine natures. You have told her now—
Have you?—that she was wicked and unfaithful,
For loving you.

Almund. It is irrational
To try to ope one's being to the dead;
And, Hubert, you have never known your friend.
You do not even call by their own names
My sins and my temptations. I must back,
Back to life's dreary offices. Farewell. [*Going.*]

Hubert. The straight, gaunt figures! And how sharp a look
He fixed on the poor outlines! Nay, I'll buy
One more last grace for her. Almund, come back,
And seal these eyes with kisses; they will purge you
Of every evil thought. You stumble.—Almund,
What secret are you hiding from your friend?
Could you not bear her importunity?
It was most innocent—such as the princess,
I mean the lady Millicent herself,
Had scarcely blamed.

Almund. What, do you lead me to her?
Can she be mine now 'neath the coffin-lid,
And will you never touch her any more,
Nor look upon the face of her young son,
Who bears my features? Will you make a place
For me to lie beside her when I'm dead,
And never come between?—*I am her lover.*

Hubert. O Almund, you look young—an exaltation,
A glory in your face ; the past unfolds
In all its miracle,—for, ah, how dearly
If you have loved her, have you loved your friend.
Take the brown head to rest upon your knee,
For mine has simply been the nurse's part.
The little one bore piningly, and now
We've found where she belongs.

Almund [*folding* CARA *in his arms*]. Oh, she had drink
For a man's deepest thirst.

Hubert. Poor, broken trifle—
All that is left to offer to my friend
Amid this cursèd, senseless sacrifice.
How dared you keep your love from her?

Almund. The princess,
My troth-plight ; there were others.

Hubert. I forgot,
My Almund, you are born that nonè can live
Without your love ; there is no little weed
But will proclaim its birthright to the sun ;
You hid from this sweet vetchling, and the leaves
Lost all their sturdy twine.—Ay, there were others.
This blessèd heart, she could not understand
That love can have no empery on earth,
There are so many others. 'Tis but little
That we can do for them, and yet to ease
Their pain there hath been all this tragedy.
I know not if 'tis well.

Almund. She has the kisses

Of three long years ago; my Hubert knows
How dearly Almund rates him; Millicent
Will in deep-bosomed friendship be my own;
And things are settled on this blithe, green earth
Almost as it were heaven, where happy souls
Ne'er vex themselves with marriage. The young kingcups
Are sprouting lustily, and golden nature
Is full of her fresh joys. Oh, we must learn
To drink life's pleasures if we would be pure,
Deep, holy draughts, and the girl-cupbearer
Must not be set aside.

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> Now I can see their scrimpèd kirtles green,
> And swinging beads of dew about their necks,
> They've not the pretty caps of midsummer,
> Poor midges—only cowslip bells, o'er-young,

That fall at every jerk; and dirty cups
From acorns of last year.
I'll make my tiny peakèd bonnets red,'
And see if they will pick 'em from the twigs.

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